
RIDI
UNDER THE OAK TREE
SEASON ONE 5
BY SUJI KIM

UNDER THE OAK TREE

Season 1 (5)

Suji Kim

RIDI

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Chapter 158

"Come here. You're letting the rain in."

Riftan approached her and wrapped his arms around her waist from behind. The ticklish sensation of his scruffy chin on her cheek made her hunch her shoulders. Rubbing his lips on her temple, he squeezed her tender breast.

The brewing storm made the air thick, and lightning lit up the night once more. Deafening thunder boomed across the sky. It was so ear-splitting that it made Maxi fear that the heavens would come crashing down on them.

Letting out a soft sigh, Riftan led a trembling Maxi back to the cot and made her sit down.

"I must go. I don't want you taking a step out of this tent until the storm is over, do you understand?"

Maxi looked up at him, wide-eyed. "You're… going out? In s-such weather?"

"The horses will be agitated. I'll have to check the stables and increase our defenses."

Riftan lit a new candle. While he donned his armor, Maxi sat swaddled in a blanket as she listened to the pelting rain that fell like hooves thudding the ground, the flapping of the tent walls against the fierce wind, and the rolling thunder. Occasionally, she also heard the bellowing of the soldiers.

Her heart pounded uncontrollably. It was as if the world had been thrown into chaos.

Looking anxious, she asked tentatively, "D-Do you think there will be trouble… because of what happened yesterday?"

Riftan paused from putting on his robe and turned toward her.

Lowering her eyes, Maxi added, "If… there were to be trouble in the c-camp because of me…"

"And why would that be your fault?" Riftan replied brusquely. "If anyone's to blame, it's Richard Breston. That man has been causing problems even before you arrived at Eth Lene. I'm sure you've noticed, but the vice-commander bears me nothing but enmity. Even if you weren't here, he would have used whatever opportunity he could to get on my nerves."

Maxi's face hardened. Anger surged in her chest once more as she recalled the despicable words the barbaric man had flung at Riftan.

"To think he would mock you… w-when you've done him no wrong… What a vile man."

For a moment, Riftan regarded her with a strange expression before shrugging as if to say he was used to such hostility.

"Richard Breston is a scion of a prestigious family that has been around since the Roem Empire, and his father is a knight hailed as Rosem Wigrew's reincarnation in Balto. It probably affronts him that a man like me is given the same honor as his father."

A cruel smile twisted his lips.

"I've been ignoring him because he was just a pest, but I can't let this slide. I will hammer it into his head never to approach you again."

"But… we are at war. If there w-were to be internal strife…"

"I don't intend to clash swords with him this instant. I'm just going to give him a warning to ensure that he won't cause any more problems."

Hearing the ruthlessness in his voice only inflamed Maxi's worries. Though she did not know what he intended, even a three-year-old would have been able to guess that it would involve violence.

Each flash of lightning lit up his sharp features, making him appear colder and more ruthless than usual. As if sensing her apprehension, Riftan's face softened, and he knelt on one knee before her.

He stroked her leg with a gloved hand. "How are you feeling? Are you in pain anywhere?"

Blushing, Maxi shook her hand. "I'm… all right."

"What about your injury?"

"I wouldn't call it… a-an injury."

The swelling in her wrist had gone down. Riftan lowered her hand after carefully assessing it.

"I'll send for Garrow and Ulyseon. I want you to remain in the tent until the storm has passed."

Maxi nodded, and Riftan pecked her on the lips before he left the tent. She watched him walk into the raging storm. It upset her that he would probably spend the whole day out in the rain and gale.

Plagued by the guilt of being the only person sitting idle in a cozy tent, Maxi paced aimlessly around the cramped space. Soon, a rain-soaked Ulyseon and Garrow entered the tent. Maxi rushed over to them with a handful of towels.

"Thank you, my lady."

The two squires dried their hair and peeled off their dripping robes to hang them near the entrance. When they strode into the halo of lamplight, Maxi saw Ulyseon's despondent expression and drooping shoulders.

He regarded her with crestfallen eyes. "You must have been quite frightened yesterday, my lady. Please accept my sincerest apology. I should not have allowed those animals to insult you so…"

"N-No! As I said yesterday… you are not to blame, Ulyseon. You bravely defended me. If anything… I am grateful."

"My lady…" Ulyseon choked out, looking close to tears.

Maxi gave an awkward chuckle when she recalled how the squire had snarled like an angry hound at the men who towered a head above him.

As he gazed at her with his guileless, puppy dog eyes, she wondered where the gallant knight-in-training had gone.

Garrow studied her as he draped his wet towel over a chair. "Are you hurt anywhere, my lady?"

Maxi shook her head. "N-No, I am perfectly fine. I was just… a little shocked."

"We will make sure nothing of the sort ever happens again."

Giving them a grateful smile, Maxi led the two young men to the table. After lighting another candle on the table, the three of them ate breakfast while listening to the cacophony outside. They ate their fill of bread and wine, then began the work of covering the

gaps in the tent with a tar-coated sheet to prevent the rain from seeping in.

The squires tried vehemently to dissuade her, but Maxi insisted on helping. She simply could not sit by while the two of them did all the work. Time flew as they laid the fabric on the floor and hauled items that were in danger of getting soaked to the middle of the tent.

Half a day passed before the rain began to ease and the thunder withdrew. Maxi peered through the tent flap and saw that the dark clouds were gone. Faint rays of light streamed down from the gray sky. Rain still fell in white sheets over puddles, branches, and the barracks, but the fierce gusts had died down.

Maxi threw on her robe and drew the hood over her head. Ulyseon noticed her and stopped in the middle of polishing Riftan's armor.

He darted over to her. "Do you wish to visit the infirmary, my lady?"

"I want to make sure… the men are all right. Do you think I can?"

"Security was heightened after yesterday's incident, so it should be fine, my lady."

The squire surveyed the vicinity to check for anyone suspicious, then nodded. "And everyone, including the Baltonian knights, is currently in an emergency meeting in the central barracks. I don't think anyone will try anything with us."

"A-An emergency meeting?"

"The monsters are acting strangely," Garrow chimed in. "According to the scouts that returned at dawn, a portion of the troll army has moved west. The meeting is to figure out what their plans are."

"D-Do you think it will go smoothly? The Baltonian knights… seemed v-very angry…"

"The Remdragon Knights are a great deal more incensed than they are," Ulyseon replied, his purple eyes flashing coldly. "Even so, we are not foolish enough to fight among ourselves when our enemy is right in front of us. I am sure that man Breston isn't so foolish, either."

Maxi furrowed her brow. She doubted that the vice-commander was in possession of such good sense. After all, had he not harassed

and intimidated another man's wife despite being a commanding officer of a knightly order?

As if that were not bad enough, the man had barraged Riftan with insults and even publicly challenged him to a duel. He certainly seemed like a supercilious man.

I wonder if Ulyseon is right.

Maxi's eyes clouded with concern. Contrary to her fears, no news of a duel came even as the sun began to set. The urgent situation had forced the men to put their animosity aside.

Riftan returned to the tent late that afternoon.

"A battle has broken out at the front," he said as he hastily changed clothes. "I must depart at once."

Maxi had been preparing herbs on the table. She turned to look at him with wide eyes. Though it was still hours away from nightfall, gray clouds blackened the sky. The thought of Riftan riding into battle through the rain in pitch darkness chilled her to her bones.

"W-Will it be an all-out war?"

"Not yet, but I'm going to turn it into one," he replied apathetically as he swapped his wet boots for a new pair.

Beside him, Maxi nervously fidgeted with her feet. "Turn it into one? W-What do you mean?"

"It's likely the monsters are simply trying to provoke us, but I intend to turn this into a decisive battle. I'm going to end this tedious war as quickly as possible."

Anxiety curled in her chest at his determined tone. "Promise me… y-you won't do anything reckless."

It had taken mere seconds for Riftan to get changed. He now threw on his armor as he turned to look at her.

His frown morphed into an incredulous smile. "I'm not sure if I'm the one who should be making that promise."

Sensing the rebuke in his statement, Maxi blushed. "Are you… s-still angry with me?"

"Did you think I'd be placated so easily?" he said with a snort. "I've been trying to keep my anger in check, so don't think I've forgiven you for coming here against my wishes. I will not be satisfied until you're safely back in Anatol unscathed."

"B-But last night—"

Maxi caught herself and clamped her mouth shut. Color rose in her cheeks. A strange silence descended on them, and Maxi awkwardly smoothed her dress as she sneaked a glance up at him.

To her disbelief, a hint of red colored Riftan's cheekbones. He irritably ran a hand through his wet hair.

"Do you not know what I go through when you're in front of me? I've been celibate for months in this wretched place! Every day, I imagine you next to me whenever I lie down to rest!"

He strode up to her until their noses were touching.

"It's like waving a bone in front of a starving dog," he growled. "But I didn't want to do that with you in a place like this! I didn't want to embrace you like I was merely satisfying my desire. But, when you're right in front of me, I just can't…"

Seeing the shock on her face at his fervent admission, Riftan clenched his jaw. He scrubbed his face, looking exhausted.

"I'm going to end this damned war within a month, so promise me… that you'll be careful."

Unable to speak, Maxi bobbed her head. She watched him stride toward the entrance, sword in hand, before snapping to her senses.

She rushed over and wrapped her arms around his waist, gazing up at him with anxious eyes. Riftan stiffened.

"You mustn't… leave while you're so angry. W-We might not be able to see each other for a while… We don't know when the battle will end…"

Riftan's expression seemed somehow vulnerable as he returned her gaze.

Cupping his cheek, she said beseechingly, "Please promise me… that you'll return unharmed. I give you my word… th-that I'll be careful too, so—"

Maxi was so choked with emotion that she was unable to continue. When she rested her cheek against his back, Riftan turned around and drew her into a tight embrace. His cold, armored hand pushed into her hair and longingly caressed the lines of her neck.

She felt his shaky breath on her nape as he mumbled, "Once it becomes an all-out battle, only the barest number of men will

remain to guard the castle. Anything can happen, so always take Garrow and Ulyseon with you wherever you go. Ruth will also stay back, so go to him if anything happens."

Maxi nodded without looking up.

"I'll be back soon," he said after a long pause.

He kissed her earlobe. She clung to him like a baby monkey clutching its mother, and he had to pry her away.

Wanting to see him off, Maxi threw on her cloak.

"The Knights of Phil Aaron will be leaving with us," Riftan said, stopping her at the entrance. "Don't come outside."

"B-But I'll only—"

"Stay inside," he said firmly.

He then gave instructions to Ulyseon and Garrow who were waiting just outside. Standing at the entrance of the tent, Maxi watched as he trudged away through the wet darkness.

Beacons blazed atop the ramparts, illuminating the procession of soldiers on warhorses making their way toward the city gates. Soon, the knights began their march out of the enclosed city.

The remaining knights stood guard near the ramparts with extra vigilance, and mages came out to inspect the magical devices installed on the walls. Eth Lene Castle was now on full alert.

Chapter 159

The rain continued to fall with varied intensity throughout the night. Maxi lay awake in her cot, her pounding heart preventing her from sleeping even though she knew she needed to rest for the following day's work.

Tormented by anxiety, she had been staring into space with sunken eyes for God knew how long when she heard sobbing. She sat bolt upright.

At first, she wondered if she had misheard the wind. However, the faint sound that resonated through the rain gradually grew clearer.

Throwing on her robe, Maxi rushed out of the tent.

"H-Has something happened?"

The squires had pitched a tarp over the entrance to prevent the rain from getting in. Ulyseon snapped his head up from the small brazier.

"The noise must have woken you up, my lady."

The squire stared out into the white mist that had descended on the camp with a look of apprehension. The rain was now a weak, dew-like drizzle, and the sky held the bluish hint of dawn.

The bone-chilling, mournful wailing rang through the eerie landscape. Maxi glanced around, trying to locate its source.

"Who on earth is crying? Has… s-something happened to the female clerics?"

"It isn't the female clerics, my lady. There are banshees in the mountains."

"Banshees?"

Ulyseon approached the dripping edge of the tarp. He pointed to a black cliff that enveloped the ramparts like a shield.

Maxi's eyes grew wide. On a large boulder that towered like the head of a snake, people-shaped bodies in black robes stood in the dim light. Maxi's heart sank at their ominous presence.

"A-Are they… monsters?"

"They are spirits, to be precise. They will not cause us any harm directly, so you mustn't worry, my lady. Those creatures merely…" Ulyseon trailed off before continuing cautiously, "…wail. They will leave once they've cried their hearts out."

His voice was barely audible over the hysterical wailing. Maxi hunched her shoulders as she gazed at the dark figures standing tall in the hazy mist.

Though they were too far away for her to be certain, she thought she could make out six of them in total. The figures tore at their clothes as they howled.

"B-But banshees…"

Unable to finish the sentence, Maxi pressed her lips together. Banshees were the spirits of death that came for those whose ends were near. People even believed that a banshee's wailing visits always ended in mass death.

As if sensing her anxiety, Ulyseon said in an exaggeratedly upbeat voice, "I know it's hard, but try to ignore the noise, my lady. The clerics are preparing a ritual to banish them as we speak."

Maxi forced a smile on her lips.

The wailing went on for hours. Though the clerics used divine magic and banished the banshees to prevent morale from deteriorating, the relief was short-lived. The spirits quickly returned and continued their keening.

Maxi had been sick with worry even before the appearance of these creatures; now she was close to losing her mind entirely. After half a day of tending to the wounded while trying to ignore the noise, she was at the end of her tether. Thus, she went to see Ruth.

"Ruth… c-can't we send the spirits away with magic?"

They were in the sorcerer's small tent located next to the Remdragon Knights' barracks. Ruth looked up from the parchment he had been scribbling on. He had clearly been working on the rune for Hebaron's injury, as his desk was piled with reams of parchment filled with complex runes.

Ruth wearily pushed the parchment aside, rubbing his eyes. "Are you referring to the banshees? We could, but we'd be poking a

hornets' nest. We would have to deal with far more dangerous things than just their wailing if we anger them. If divine magic wasn't enough to drive them away, then it's best to leave them alone."

"B-But… they're making everyone anxious. Even the patients are growing restless."

"They'll be gone in a day at most. They'll leave once they've cried their hearts out. Seeing as you're here, my lady, would you mind helping me with this?"

He handed her something that resembled a flat tray.

Maxi accepted the item before she knew what she was doing. "W-What's this?"

"It's a magical device for the ramparts. It should be easier now that you have experience making one."

Flipping the polished monster bone, Ruth pointed to the intricate engraving. "You only have to engrave this rune on this spot right here."

"B-But I don't know how… I only copied runes onto parchment last time."

"It's not that different from drawing on parchment. You just have to squeeze the rune into this empty spot. I would like to do it myself, but I already have my hands full trying to break Sir Hebaron's curse."

Ruth looked worn out as he rubbed his neck. Seeing that his exhaustion far outweighed hers, Maxi pulled the chair across from him and sat down without another word. She mused that having something to do might help to calm her nerves.

The white disk was likely made of wyvern bones. She carefully began sketching the rune on the underside.

Contrary to her hopes, her concerns for Riftan and the banshees' wailing made it difficult to focus. After running shaking fingers over the smooth surface of the magical device, Maxi clutched her forehead.

"I can't do it. M-My head feels empty…"

Ruth heaved a sigh. "Worrying about it won't change anything, my lady."

"You know… it's not something I can control. I'm not l-levelheaded like you, Ruth. I feel sick with worry that something bad might happen. I-I can't stop thinking… that the banshees are a bad omen…"

Maxi looked up at Ruth with teary eyes and bit her lip.

"Riftan said… he'll start an all-out war. What if we lose? W-What will happen then?"

"My lady, the Remdragon Knights have overcome greater adversities than this. You must trust in Sir Riftan. So far, we still have the upper hand, and…" Ruth trailed off, and his expression grew skeptical. "I'm not sure if Sir Riftan can successfully turn it into a full-scale war. The trolls are well aware that it's to their advantage to drag this war on. They won't be baited so easily."

"B-But… i-isn't there a battle raging as we speak?"

"It's merely one of many skirmishes launched by the monsters to chip away our numbers. They used the same tactic to capture several of our castles. Trolls have limitless regeneration. They can heal themselves of any wound in a day, while humans cannot. They know that fighting more battles will give them the upper hand, so they'll likely avoid entering an all-out confrontation. And with the coalition army in such disarray… I doubt they'll manage to lure the monsters out."

Maxi's face hardened at Ruth's explanation. Even after hearing that an all-out war was unlikely, her heart only felt heavier.

She felt like a child desperately trying to hold off a whipping. Even if the men were able to overcome the current crisis, it would only delay the inevitable, bloody conclusion. It would be better for them to end this war while the odds were still in their favor.

Collecting herself, Maxi picked up her quill once more. If Riftan were successful, they could return to Anatol at the end of this battle.

For once, Maxi prayed that Ruth was wrong. She wanted this torturous period to be over as quickly as possible. Gnawing her lip, she tried once more to focus her attention on outlining the rune.

By the time the rainclouds retreated and the sun beamed across the sky, the banshees disappeared along with the mist. Still, the trepidation brought about by their visit still hung over the castle.

The faces of the soldiers were strained with a new tension, while the female clerics spoke less and less each day. Maxi desperately kept herself busy in an effort to keep the heavy air from crushing her under its weight.

Attempting to drive the useless thoughts from her head, she dutifully tended to the twenty or so men remaining in the infirmary during the day. At night, she helped Ruth search for a way to break Hebaron's curse or worked on the magical device for the ramparts.

True to Ruth's predictions, a large-scale battle did not happen. Reports stated that the monsters had retreated when the scale of the battle began to grow. The coalition army had given chase, but the unfavorable terrain had forced them to fall back mid-pursuit.

In the end, they suffered forty-six casualties, and the war returned to a state of inconsequential skirmishes. Maxi heaved a sigh. The infirmary, which had managed to empty two-thirds of its cots, once again became packed with the wounded.

The accuracy of Ruth's prediction gave her goosebumps. While it would no doubt take half a day for the trolls to fully recuperate, it would take at least a week for the women to treat all the injured.

The coalition army was bound to dwindle the longer the war dragged on. Maxi was certain Riftan knew this as well. Even whilst bustling about the infirmary, she could not stop worrying that he might wage a reckless battle out of impatience.

Her worst fear was that Riftan would be struck with an incurable curse similar to Hebaron's. From what Ruth had discovered so far, the most efficient way to break the curse was to kill its source. However, locating the creature responsible among the army of monsters was like finding a needle in a haystack.

Even if they were to win the war, they would have no means of tracking the creature if it managed to survive. Hebaron would likely suffer a slow and agonizing death. The thought that Riftan might suffer the same fate rendered her frozen with fear.

Maxi irritably scrubbed at her ashen face. The lack of sleep over the past few days made her head ache, and she constantly felt dizzy. She tried to empty her mind as she stirred a pot of herbs on a brazier.

At that moment, Idsilla bounded into the tent looking exuberant.

"Lady Calypse! I just saw Elba!"

Maxi looked up in surprise. The girl clasped Maxi's hand, sobbing.

"The Livadonian royal knights just returned to reorganize, and Elba was with them! He had a new scar on his face…" Pressing her lips together, Idsilla wiped the tears spilling down her cheeks on her sleeve. "But he seemed fine."

"Th-That is… wonderful news."

Knowing the extent of Idsilla's worry for her brother, Maxi was relieved at the news. The girl smiled brightly and nodded.

"I overheard the soldiers talking, and it seems as though they're going to return to the battlefront with the remaining men as soon as they've finished regrouping. I think they're aiming for a decisive battle this time."

Maxi's face fell. The coalition army had ultimately decided to bear the risk and attempt to end the war.

It was an inevitable decision. After all, even Maxi had come to realize that a drawn-out war was unfavorable for the allied forces.

Maxi swallowed dryly and asked, "W-Will you really… not meet your brother before he leaves for battle again?"

Idsilla adamantly shook her head. "I'll go see him when this war is over. He will return alive. I know it."

There was such conviction in the girl's voice that Maxi felt her heart still. Emotions surged inside her as she gazed at Idsilla's undaunted face. Squeezing the girl's hand, Maxi said an earnest prayer for the coalition army's victory.

◆◆◆

After spending the night at Eth Lene Castle, the Livadonian knights made preparations for departure the very next day. Soldiers hauled weapons and provisions onto carts, and the female clerics supplied them with an ample supply of emergency curatives.

It was a massive party. With the Temple Knights and the remaining mercenaries and soldiers gone, only three clerics, five

mages, thirty-five knights, and about four hundred soldiers remained at the castle.

Those who stayed back stood vigilant guard at the city gates, and a squadron visited the battlefield every two days to transport the wounded. Maxi and the female clerics tended to the injured men all day long. Even the mages helped heal the men in the infirmary, as maintaining the army's numbers was the most pressing priority.

They did not hold back on their mana use either. Men that arrived severely wounded were able to return to the battlefield after just three or four days. Even so, no one considered it fortunate. Maxi felt the heart-wrenching process in her bones.

Whenever she thought about the soldiers who had to return to battle after being on death's door, she felt the weight of a rock lodged in her stomach.

The hardest was burying the young soldiers who returned as cold corpses. Her only solace was in knowing that the coalition army's relentless pursuit was gradually pushing back the monsters.

Chapter 160

"If the coalition army continues its advance north," said Ruth, "they will join forces with the Baltonian Royal Army near the Pamela Plateau. With Balto's army also advancing eastward, we should be able to corner the monsters as long as everything goes according to plan."

Hearing the good news, Maxi smiled despite her exhaustion. Ruth had taken to relaying the details of the war to Maxi after each of the Grand Duke's meetings.

"It shouldn't take more than two or three batches of provisions till the end of the war."

Hearing Ruth's confidence in a complete victory, Maxi's heart felt lighter. If Ruth, a skeptic to the bone, believed they could win, it must mean that the coalition army had fortune's favor.

As she stirred a boiling pot, Maxi began calculating with her mental abacus. One would have to ride for a day and a half without rest to reach the Pamela Plateau from Eth Lene. Considering the mobility of the infantry, the round trip would likely take three to four days at most. Since the army had taken fifteen days' worth of provisions, sending a further two or three batches would mean that this war would be over in less than a month and a half.

"Your remedy is spilling over."

Ruth's voice snapped Maxi out of her thoughts. She quickly removed the pot from the brazier and set it beside her.

The infirmary was full of injured men who had arrived in the night. Even though the remaining mages were doing their best to heal the wounded, they could not restore all of them to full health in merely a couple of days.

For this reason, they treated the patients according to the severity of their wounds. It was left to the female clerics to keep these thirty or so men alive until the mages could see to them.

Maxi rubbed her tired eyes as she transferred the detoxicant into a small vial. Ruth regarded her for a moment before furrowing his brow.

"Are you getting enough rest, my lady?" he asked, running a scrupulous gaze over her. "You look pale. You are eating properly, aren't you?"

"I-I do eat whenever I get the chance," Maxi mumbled, avoiding his eyes.

In truth, she had not had a proper meal since Riftan's departure. Anxiety dampened her appetite, and forcing bread down her throat only made her stomach churn. After studying her gaunt face, Ruth let out a small sigh.

"I think your nerves have grown overly sensitive lately, my lady. You won't be able to hold out long in that state. We don't know when this war is going to end, so you must take better care of yourself."

"I… I am aware of that."

"I don't think you are."

Ruth took the vial and ladle from her and called for the squires standing guard at the tent's entrance.

"You should get some sleep, my lady. Rovar, Livakion, please escort her ladyship to her tent."

"Th-That won't be necessary! I can't be the only one resting… while everyone else is working, so—"

"Didn't you heal three people today with magic?"

She had, in fact, healed five people. Ruth was unaware of the additional two because she had done it while he had gone to see Duke Aren. Maxi pressed her lips together, and Ruth glared at her before adamantly pointing to the entrance.

"It is customary for one to rest after magic use. Try to rest for half a day."

"But, Ruth… you tend to the patients… *and* you're looking for a way to break S-Sir Hebaron's curse. If anyone needs rest, it's—"

"You need not worry about my health, my lady. I'm already caring for it like a precious jewel."

He scowled as though he found her stubbornness annoying.

“You, however, are neglecting yourself. You would indeed be an inconvenience if you were to drag dozens of servants with you everywhere, refusing to lift a finger, but overworking yourself like a slave is no different. I sometimes find it hard to believe you are a daughter of the House of Croyso.”

Stung by his words, Maxi awkwardly turned away from him. “I-I understand. I will rest, as you wish.”

“Please do not allow her ladyship out of the tent for the rest of the day,” Ruth instructed Ulyseon.

After throwing Ruth a glare, Maxi made her way back to Riftan’s tent. She doubted she would be able to rest. Yet, as if putting her assumption to shame, her eyes grew heavy the moment she lay her head on the pillow. She rubbed her throbbing temples for a while before lying on her side and pulling the thin blanket over her head.

She must have fallen deep asleep, as the next thing she knew, someone was shaking her awake. It took a moment for her to come to her senses. Just how long had she been asleep? Maxi was blinking vacantly when Ulyseon’s urgent voice penetrated her foggy thoughts.

“My lady! You must get up! We have to get away from here at once.”

“W-What?” Maxi asked, looking up at the squire in surprise.

Ulyseon urged her into a sitting position. “There is no time to explain. We must hurry!”

Maxi hurriedly got out of bed and followed him out of the tent. At that moment, a loud noise pierced her ears.

Her eyes widening, Maxi looked toward the commotion. Armed knights were fighting what appeared to be large lumps of black mud near the southern gate.

Screams rang all around them as panicked people ran about the camp in confusion. Maxi instinctively took a step back. Had the world shifted during the short time she had been asleep?

“What on e-earth is happening? Why are there monsters inside the castle?”

“Curses! Ghouls sprang up from the ground. The monsters must have created a mass of undead and buried them here,” Ulyseon

shouted angrily as he pulled Maxi's arm.

Maxi's eyes grew even wider. "B-But when—"

"I'll explain later, my lady. We must get you to safety first."

He sprinted through the cluster of tents, and Maxi scampered behind him, panting. Just then, a hand shot up from the ground and grabbed her ankle.

Terrified, Maxi screamed her lungs out. The damp, icy hand with protruding black bones latched onto her and yanked at her leg.

Maxi screamed and frantically tried to kick free. As the ghoul clawed its way out of the ground, Ulyseon cut off its arm. The severed hand, however, remained latched to Maxi's ankle.

Her body racking with sobs, she pried off the dismembered hand with shaking fingers and flung it away. It was such a terrible sensation that she thought no amount of washing would rid her of the feeling.

Ulyseon drew her close behind him as she frantically wiped at where the ghoul had touched her skin.

"Stay close, my lady!"

Only then did she realize that more than one ghoul was crawling from the ground. Ulyseon swung his sword at the half-rotten corpses sluggishly digging themselves out of the earth.

A bluish glint flashed from his sword, and in an instant, he had lopped off three ghoul heads. Maxi watched in horror as the ghouls fumbled over the ground in search of their severed skulls.

Ulyseon yanked her arm. "This way, my lady! It should be safer atop the ramparts."

Other than sprinting behind the squire, there was nothing else she could do. Ulyseon cut down the ghouls as they ran, and they were out of the chaos before they knew it.

He led her up the ramparts and said, "The undead keep springing up, but you should be safe up here, my lady. If any of them climb the stairs, I will slay them at once."

Barely managing to reach the watchtower, Maxi rested her hand on the battlement as she tried to catch her breath. Though she felt dizzy, being on the wall gave her an unobstructed view of the unfolding chaos below.

About half of the barracks had collapsed, and agitated horses ran amok about the camp. Armed knights yelled as they stabbed the emerging ghouls with long spears. It was a scene from hell.

"W-What about… the others?"

"Mage Ruth is over there, my lady. You mustn't worry. Ghouls are not that powerful. There are many accomplished knights here as well as high priests, so it shouldn't take long to exterminate them."

Maxi was barely listening as she frantically scanned the commotion. What of Hebaron and Garrow? And what about Idsilla and the other female clerics? Would they all be safe amid such pandemonium?

She was frantically searching the camp for a familiar face when a loud explosion reverberated behind her.

Maxi whirled around. The magical devices had been activated, and double barriers shot up in front of the ramparts. Beyond them, an army of trolls clad in black armor marched toward the city. Ulyseon let out a suppressed groan.

"How in the devil…?"

After briefly covering his face with his hand in shock, the squire swiftly picked up the long kopel propped in the corner of the watchtower. Sticking his head over the battlement, Ulyseon blew into it. The sonorous blare rang out over the camp — an alarm signaling an external invasion. Maxi felt her hair stand on end.

"Don't be scared, my lady. I will protect you at all costs."

Maxi was unable to comprehend his words. The young man's determined voice was like smoke to her ears. The sudden uproar was beyond her ability to cope. Maxi clutched her forehead as she tried in vain to regain her sense of reality.

Ghouls causing mayhem within the city. An army of trolls converging on the city walls.

She was trapped in a nightmare.

Didn't the coalition army drive all the trolls north? And just how long have those ghouls been buried here?

She suddenly came to a bone-chilling realization. Ulyseon had said that it was the monsters that created the undead. That could only

mean that they had buried the ghouls during their initial capture of Eth Lene Castle.

Was their retreat from the city a ruse to get the coalition army into Eth Lene? If that was the case, why now? Why did they not ambush the city while the knights were still here?

The monsters might have simply been after the provisions. The city currently held enough food to sustain an army of fifteen thousand men for a month and a half. If the monsters were to take all of it, even the coalition army would not be able to last.

Maxi hugged her shoulders as a chill ran through her. At that moment, she heard Garrow's voice calling from below the wall.

"Uly! We've lured the ghouls to one spot! Bring her ladyship down now!"

Peering over the edge, Maxi saw five or so soldiers gathered at the foot of the stairs. Ulyseon led her by the arm once more as they dashed down the stone steps.

When Maxi finally managed to stagger back to ground level on trembling legs, Garrow and the soldiers promptly encircled her.

"The female clerics and patients have been evacuated to the north end of the camp. You should also take shelter until everything settles, my lady."

Supporting her with a hand, Garrow briskly strode on. Maxi hastily tried to keep up. As they passed through the dizzying commotion, Maxi saw knights with spire-shaped lances and soldiers carrying spears ten kevettes[1] tall.

Keeping the formation, they drove the ghouls to a single spot. It was reassuring to see their side fall into ranks with such cool precision despite the abruptness of the ambush.

If they could defend the walls until the coalition army's return, they could protect the provisions as well as the lives of everyone in the city.

Chapter 161

"This way! Hurry, my lady!"

Maxi had been distracted by the skirmish when she heard Garrow's urgent voice. Snapping to attention, she dashed across the bumpy ground. It was vital for her to get to safety to avoid becoming a hindrance to the fighting men.

Gathering her skirt in one hand, she sprinted across the chaotic city square. They ran north for a while, finally stopping at the large storage tent. Soldiers guarded the entrance.

Entrusting Maxi to the soldiers, Garrow said, "The clerics have cast a barrier around the tent. The ghouls won't be able to get in."

Inside, Maxi glanced around at the sacks of grain piled into a mountain. When she spotted the female clerics huddled on the floor at the innermost end of the makeshift shelter, she ran straight to them.

Idsilla bolted to her feet. "Lady Calypse! You're safe!"

"I-Idsilla… are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine, but… S-Selina isn't here."

Idsilla bit her lip, looking as though she might burst into tears. As she tried to reassure the girl, Maxi glanced at the ashen faces of the other women. Many were missing.

Idsilla sobbed as she clung to Maxi's arm. "We were only able to evacuate… h-half of the injured men from the infirmary. Those who couldn't move were…"

When Maxi tried to recall how many of the wounded men had been immobile in their cots like corpses, a terrible ache began thumping in her temples. She clutched her forehead, and Ulyseon hurried over to steady her.

"Don't worry, my lady. The others will also be hiding somewhere safe. I will go look for them once things die down."

Distraught, Idsilla latched onto Ulyseon and bombarded him with questions.

"How did this happen? We heard the alarm signaling an invasion. Didn't the coalition army drive all the trolls north? Our army hasn't been defeated, has it?"

Startled, Ulyseon waved his hands.

"Of course not! If our army had fallen, the monsters wouldn't have taken the long way around to the southern gate. They've been waiting for a chance to attack while most of the knights are away."

"Then, what will happen to us now? Will we be able to hold them off with the remaining men?"

Idsilla's fiery voice rang through the tent. Terrified, some of the female clerics began to weep.

When the noise grew out of hand, the knight commanding the soldiers outside the tent barked, "Be quiet! We are doing our best to fight the monsters. Once we've wiped out the ghouls, we will immediately assume defense. Keep your wits about you, and do as you're told!"

The sobbing gradually died down at his commanding rebuke. Managing to regain self-control, Idsilla murmured an apology and returned to her place among the women.

A stomach-knotting amount of time passed. A minute felt like an hour, and an hour felt as long as a day. Just as Maxi was convinced that the howls of the ghouls and bellows of the knights would go on forever, two soldiers came rushing into the tent.

"We've got the ghouls in one place."

The relief in the tent was short-lived as the soldier added, "But many of our men are injured. They require immediate treatment."

The commanding knight ordered the female clerics to see to the wounded at once. The women's faces were a mix of uneasiness and determination as they filed out. Ignoring Ulyseon's objections, Maxi followed after them.

The sight that awaited them outside was of a ravaged camp and soldiers rushing about the wreckage.

The men cleared the mangled tents and made temporary cots for the wounded. The female clerics, along with Maxi, immediately got

to work. There were about thirty-two in total. Considering that there were currently a little over three hundred men at Eth Lene Castle, the damage was not insignificant.

After inspecting the conditions of the wounded, Maxi used her magic to heal those with minor injuries first. Bolstering the number of healthy, battle-ready men was the biggest priority.

She spent quite some time healing when a familiar voice cried out.

"Those damned monsters were dead set on humiliating us!"

Maxi jerked her head up. Not far from her, Hebaron was bellowing at the top of his lungs. He had a giant claymore clutched in one hand.

"Stop your nagging, sorcerer! You're not my wife!"

"It's you who should stop acting like a stubborn child, Sir Hebaron! How are you going to fight with that wound?"

Ruth appeared equally furious as he fumed at the knight.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed? Is that it?"

"Goddammit! This little scratch is nothing! I've spent enough time being useless in bed!"

Maxi hurried over to them. The two men immediately went quiet when they saw her approaching.

Before they could speak, Maxi stared up in disbelief at the burly knight clad in heavy armor. "W-What on earth do you think you're doing? You are still wounded."

"Not you too, my lady."

Sheathing the huge claymore on his back, Sir Hebaron heaved a sigh.

"I'm good as new thanks to the remedy you gave me."

"Th-That remedy… only numbs the pain! If you keep moving around, your wound—"

"We are in a crisis, my lady," he said flatly. "I will obediently receive treatment again once this fight is over."

Ruth cursed out loud.

"You think you'll survive to receive treatment? Don't make me laugh. You'll be the first to die if you fight in that state, Sir Hebaron!"

"Pray for it, why don't you?" Hebaron said through gritted teeth, glowering at Ruth. "You said it yourself! There's a high chance that

the monster that cursed me is out there right now. It would be a hundred times faster for me to slay that fiend myself than to wait for you to find another way to break the curse!”

“Damnations… Fine! Do as you wish!”

Hebaron shrugged and briskly made his way toward the city gate. Maxi was about to go after him when Ruth grabbed her arm.

“Let him go, my lady. He won’t listen to anything we say.”

“B-But… we can’t let him fight in that c-condition. You know it, too, don’t you? He’s not in any state to swing a—”

“Nothing is going to stop that obstinate man from swinging that massive weapon of his. I doubt he’ll bat an eye even if his flesh were to fall off,” Ruth said acidly, then sighed. “We’ll have to pray that the magical devices will hold up for as long as possible.”

Hearing the bitterness in his voice, Maxi anxiously watched Hebaron’s receding figure. Astonishingly, the knight betrayed no indication that he was wounded as he mounted his horse and stood in position next to Duke Aren, who was organizing the men. The soldiers’ grave expressions as they prepared for battle made Maxi’s blood run cold.

“W-What did Sir Hebaron mean… when he said the monster that cursed him might be out there?”

“Exactly that,” Ruth answered after a while.

He roughly scrubbed his face, then pointed out. Maxi turned in the direction and gasped.

The pile of ghoul corpses was beginning to squirm despite the spears skewering them.

Staring at the writhing monsters, Ruth said calmly, “They keep coming back to life even though the high priest has performed the purification ceremony. Which means there’s a high chance the necromancer controlling them is currently outside the city.”

“A necromancer?”

“An occultist, my lady. There are certain monsters capable of advanced dark magic. It’s highly likely that the necromancer is the same black lizardman that cursed Sir Hebaron.” Ruth’s face suddenly grew grave. “We are dealing with a creature that is far more dangerous than the average monster. Besieging our gates is a being

with powerful magical abilities that can lead and command a legion of monsters."

Maxi shuddered. How dangerous must the monster be for one of the greatest sorcerers of the continent to describe it so?

"H-How long will it take… f-for the coalition army to get here?"

"We've already sent word, but as to whether they'll arrive in time…"

Just then, an ear-splitting roar rang out. Maxi covered her ears. Sparks flashed beyond the gates, followed by a violent gale that crashed against the barriers. Ruth swore.

"We must strengthen the magical devices at once!"

At his command, the mages rose in unison and rushed toward the rampart stairs. Wanting to help with her meager mana, Maxi was about to follow when Ruth blocked her path.

"You must stay here, my lady. It's too dangerous."

"N-Now is not… the time to be worried about such things. If the barriers fall… that would be more d-dangerous! If I could be of assistance—"

Ignoring her, Ruth looked past her shoulder to call for Ulyseon and Garrow.

"What are you two doing, not escorting her ladyship to safety?"

At his reprimand, Ulyseon grabbed her arm. Startled, Maxi looked up at the squire with wide eyes. Ruth spun on his heels and climbed up the stairway. She watched him leave as Ulyseon began dragging her in the opposite direction.

"W-Where are you taking me? Please let go of my arm!" she cried out, utterly shocked by the squire's discourtesy.

Paying no heed to her objections, Ulyseon remained silent as he led her to an isolated area. Maxi furiously tried to free her arm while glaring at him.

"D-Did you not hear me? I said, let go!"

"Please forgive my insolence, my lady, but we must get you out of the castle."

Maxi stared at him in shock. The two squires quickly took her past the isolated forest path and toward the city walls. Up ahead, soldiers

waited for them with three horses. Ulyseon quickly rushed over and took the reins.

"Get on, my lady."

"Do you r-realize what you're saying? Are we… trying to flee… when everyone else is fighting?" Maxi asked in disbelief.

Ulyseon's face grew dark. He pressed his lips together and cast his eyes down. After a moment, his face grew determined.

"We are not running away. Since the carrier pigeon might have failed to reach the army, we are going to seek the Remdragon Knights to inform them of the invasion."

Maxi frowned. His words did not make sense.

"Th-Then why are you taking—"

"Pardon me, my lady." Garrow gripped her waist and hoisted her onto a horse. "This is an emergency. Please trust us for now."

Their obstinance made it difficult for Maxi to ask any more questions. She clutched at her reins as Ulyseon and Garrow mounted their own horses. They signaled to the soldiers with their eyes.

At their silent command, the soldiers ran their hands over the stone wall and pushed in a loose brick. A portion of the wall slid to one side, revealing a small opening.

Ulyseon entered the passageway and said over his shoulder, "Seal the entrance once we're out."

"Yes, sir."

Maxi reluctantly followed, and the entrance slid shut behind them. The darkness was disorienting.

Garrow rode next to her and seemed to sense her distress. He said in a calm voice, "There is a secret exit at the end of this passageway, my lady. There's no way the monsters would know about it, so please be assured."

"I-It's so dark."

"If you give me your reins, I will lead your horse for you. You can hold onto the saddle."

Maxi obediently handed him her reins. For about ten minutes or so, the only sound was hooves hitting the ground. Ulyseon stopped at the front of the group and banged on the wall. Seconds later, light filtered into the passageway as a narrow exit opened.

"As soon as we recaptured Eth Lene, Sir Riftan ordered a thorough inspection of the castle's layout. That's how we discovered this secret passageway."

Maxi squinted as sunlight flooded in. An uneven forest path shrouded by thick trees led away from the opening. Riding ahead, Ulyseon urged them on.

"We must be out of here before nightfall. We'll have to ride fast, so try to keep up, my lady."

"H-How long will it take… for us to reach the coalition army?"

There was a pause.

"We should reach them by tomorrow if we hurry."

"D-Do you think the city will be able to hold the fort until then?"

"Mage Ruth is with them. He won't let it fall that easily."

Maxi pursed her lips at the strange tension in the squire's voice. They rode in silence for a while until she was unable to quell her doubts any longer.

"Did you lead me out of the city… b-because you've determined that Eth Lene will fall?"

Ulyseon flinched, and his face was pale when he turned to meet her gaze. Maxi bit her lip. She had indeed thought it odd that they were bringing her along on a mission that required utmost haste. Now, seeing the truth on the squire's face made her heart sink.

"If the situation was that dire… sh-shouldn't we have… evacuated everyone through that secret—"

"The monsters would have discovered us if we'd tried to evacuate hundreds of people at the same time. And fleeing with the wounded would've been difficult," Garrow said, firmly cutting her off. "Right now, informing the coalition army of the invasion is our best option."

Feeling chastised, Maxi spurred her horse on. They rode in frantic haste along the winding forest path. Soon, a steep rock face showed between the dense trees.

Changing course, Ulyseon rode along the craggy ridge. Maxi was galloping behind him when she abruptly pulled her horse to a stop. Garrow, riding at the rear, reined in his mount with a baffled expression.

Maxi's face hardened as she checked the sun's position above the forest. "W-We aren't going north. Where… are we going, exactly?"

"My lady…"

"I want the truth. Are we really trying to meet up with the c-coalition army?"

Ulyseon's face blanched. He pressed his lips together and hung his head. That was all the answer Maxi needed. When she turned her horse around, Garrow swiftly blocked her path.

"If we travel southeast around this cliff, we'll arrive at a fortress held by Baron Gideon which has been safe from monster invasion so far. It might be a little far, but it should be the safest place. Sir Riftan ordered us to take you there straight away in the event of any problems."

"Then… who will inform the army o-of the invasion?"

"We've already sent a messenger."

Maxi flushed with anger at Garrow's calmness.

"If we're not going to the coalition army… I-I am returning to Eth Lene Castle. I cannot j-just escape on my own! Not when Ruth, Sir Hebaron… a-and the female clerics are still in there—"

"My lady," Ulyseon said, his voice heavy.

Maxi flinched and clenched her mouth shut. The squire rode up to her and continued grimly, "Do you know who those ghouls originally were?"

Before Maxi could say anything, Ulyseon launched into a rapid-fire explanation.

"A corpse turns into an undead when it is contaminated by magic. The ghouls were the original inhabitants of the city before it fell to the monsters. When they captured Eth Lene, those fiends turned the human corpses into ghouls and buried them. If we return to the city now… we will be facing the same fate."

Maxi covered her mouth with a shaking hand. When Ulyseon's words finally sunk in, she was suddenly overcome with the urge to hurl.

Chapter 162

Ulyseon looked mournful at Maxi's sickened expression.

"Please consider how devastated Sir Riftan would be if something were to happen to you, my lady."

"But… But…"

Her face crumpling in anguish, Maxi clutched Riftan's copper coin. She could not get the image of the black, rotten ghoul corpses out of her mind. She did not want to end up like that, and the thought of never seeing Riftan again tore at her heart.

She was certain she was not the only one who felt that way. Idsilla had a brother who cared for her greatly. The other female clerics had friends and family of their own, and no soldier wished for death.

Maxi looked at Ulyseon pleadingly. "Then l-let's… b-bring a few more with us. I-I won't ask that we take everyone—"

"We cannot turn back, my lady. Imagine the commotion if we did," Garrow replied, adamantly shaking his head.

The two squires' woeful expressions reflected her own.

"We also don't want to abandon the city, my lady. Please try to understand. For us, Sir Riftan's orders come first."

"Th-There is a Livadonian noblewoman w-who came to Eth Lene with me. She is a mere girl of eighteen… but she c-came because she was worried about her brother. She said she would see him after the war…"

For a moment, Ulyseon's expression grew troubled before he shook his head.

"It would be too dangerous for us to return now, my lady. I am sorry, but your safety is our priority."

"I-I am not that important! I'm not the lofty noblewoman you think—"

She bit her lip as she began shaking with sobs. Garrow watched her with a bewildered expression. He sighed, pulling on the reins of

Maxi's horse.

"We have no time to waste arguing, my lady. There might be monsters lurking about the city walls. We must cross the gorge before we're discovered."

He tugged at the reins, and Maxi's mount obediently followed. Maxi tried to suppress her tears as he dragged them along.

The faces of the people she cared about flashed through her mind. There was Ruth, who always looked out for her despite his grumbling, and Idsilla, who always tried to act strong despite being tender-hearted deep down. Then there was Hebaron and the female clerics, whom she had unknowingly grown very fond of.

It wouldn't have made much difference had I stayed in the city. I would have just become one more ghoul that the returning army would have to deal with.

Though she desperately tried to justify escaping, she could not deny that she was abandoning everyone to preserve her own life. Maxi squeezed her eyes shut, splattering tears on the saddle. Helplessness and guilt weighed on her heart.

Think of Riftan. Remember your promise to him. You assured him that you'd be careful, that you wouldn't do anything reckless…

Despite her efforts, tears continued to trickle down her cheeks even as night fell. They rode through the darkened forest. Again and again, Maxi turned to look behind her. She thought she could hear screams echoing from afar. She could not tell if the sounds were real or an auditory hallucination caused by her guilt.

Ulyseon, who had been riding in silence, suddenly spoke up.

"I think we'll have to change course."

He caught sight of Maxi's haggard face and flashed her a sympathetic look.

"I sense a horde of monsters coming this way," he said, his expression hardening. "We should turn back."

"How many?" Garrow asked gravely.

"About thirty… No, forty."

"Trolls?"

Ulyseon stared into the dark forest as if he could see through the trees and shook his head. "Kobolds or red goblins, most likely. It's

best we just avoid them."

Garrow turned his horse around. He then handed Maxi back her reins and said grimly, "We truly cannot go back now, my lady, so please ready yourself and follow our lead."

Fighting to suppress her sobs, Maxi bobbed her head. Ulyseon took the lead and galloped away first. Spurring her horse behind him, Maxi desperately tried to regain her composure. This was not the time for her to be crying like a child. Ulyseon and Garrow could be endangered because of her.

"This way, my lady. We'll follow this path to cross the rock face."

They traveled through the dense forest for about twenty minutes before Ulyseon pointed up the slope. The path was so narrow and rugged that it could hardly be called such.

"Do we have to… go up?"

"It's likely that the monsters sent garrisons up north as well in case we tried to escape. Going around is no longer an option. We'll have to climb over and head east."

"B-But what if there are monsters waiting on the opposite side?"

Ulyseon shook his head. "They have no reason to scatter their troops in so many places. And even if there are monsters, they'll likely be scouts. The two of us should be able to handle them."

"I'll take the lead from here," said Garrow, riding up the slope. "I'm more adept with this terrain."

Maxi's whole body grew tense as she climbed up the dizzyingly steep incline. Sweat streamed down her body like rain, and her breathing grew ragged.

It felt as though they had been ascending forever when they suddenly came to a stop. An unobstructed view of Eth Lene Castle stretched below them.

Maxi straightened in her saddle as she listened to the faint sounds of the siege.

Garrow muttered under his breath. "Damn it…"

Maxi quickly saw what had made the squire curse. One of the double barriers in front of the ramparts was collapsing. The monsters roared savagely and charged at the remaining barrier like a herd of buffalos.

Maxi let out a wail of despair. The size of the monster army was much bigger than what she had seen above the ramparts. What had seemed like an army of hundreds now appeared to number thousands. Not only were there trolls and red goblins in their ranks, but ogres as well.

"How in the devil did an army of that size spring out of nowhere?"

"Now is not the time for that. They probably have search teams all over the place. We have to get out of here before they catch our scent."

Collecting himself first, Ulyseon tried to get them back on the road, but Maxi could not pry her eyes away from the besieged city. As she stood dazed, Ulyseon attempted to reassure her.

"Even if the city were to fall, I am sure our men will be able to hold them off long enough for the coalition army to get back."

Though Maxi knew nothing about warfare, she knew the squire was lying. How could a mere three hundred men hold off thousands of monsters? The creatures would no doubt turn Eth Lene Castle into rubble in an instant.

She watched in terror as monsters flooded out of the ravine beneath them. Then, quite suddenly, an idea dawned on her.

"If… we collapse that… would it d-deal a big enough blow to the monsters?" she asked, pointing to the towering rock faces that rose on both sides of the road leading up to the southern gate.

For a moment, the squires stared at her vacantly. Their eyes grew wide when they realized that she was pointing to the large boulder jutting out above the rock faces.

"My lady, are you saying… you could do that?" Garrow asked, his voice trembling.

"I think I could… i-if I used magic."

Although she wanted to sound as calm as possible, her voice cracked like a croaking frog. Both squires looked doubtful.

"Do you think you have sufficient mana, my lady?"

"I have a way. If th-there's a chance of success… no matter how small… don't you think it's worth trying?"

The squires exchanged glances.

Sensing their inner conflict, Maxi desperately pleaded, "P-Please let me try it. It shouldn't t-take longer than twenty— No, fifteen minutes. If I fail, I-I'll follow you without another word."

After looking back and forth between the boulder and Maxi's face, Ulyseon bit down on his lip. He wordlessly deliberated over the matter with Garrow before bobbing his head.

"Very well. We should give it a try, my lady. But if the plan fails, we must not delay any longer."

Maxi gave a resolute nod. The squires regarded her ruefully for a moment before the three of them climbed up the rugged mountain path once more.

As she followed them, the noise of the battle gradually grew closer, and the sky turned purple.

Maxi gasped for air, certain that her lungs would burst. Pain stabbed at her thighs, and her arms shook, but she did not dare ask to stop.

They rode for an indeterminate amount of time when something suddenly leaped out of the trees.

Ulyseon drew his sword and shouted, "Stay back, my lady!"

Calming her agitated horse, Maxi hastily retreated behind the squires. Unfortunately, there were monsters to the rear as well.

Shoving Maxi behind him, Ulyseon cried out, "Garrow, they have us surrounded! Open a path now!"

As though executing a plan, the monsters advanced on them all at once. Maxi's horse began to rear, and it took all her strength to cling to its neck and attempt to rein it in. Casting a barrier at the same time was impossible.

"My lady!" cried Garrow. "Escape while we distract them! We'll be right behind you!"

Terrified, Maxi glanced around. Where was she supposed to run?

While she hesitated, completely at a loss for what to do, Ulyseon and Garrow cut down the goblins and managed to secure an opening.

"Now, my lady!"

Maxi spurred her horse and shot past the goblins like an arrow. The wind whooshed past, along with blurred impressions of thick

tree trunks.

There was no time to check that she was going in the right direction. Afraid that the monsters would catch up to her if she slowed even a little, Maxi frantically flicked the reins like a whip.

Then, out of nowhere, something came flying down on top of her. Maxi tumbled from her horse and rolled along the ground. The excruciating impact racked through her whole body, knocking all the air from her lungs.

Choking, Maxi looked up in terror. A goblin sat on her chest with a hooked weapon leveled at her. Maxi screamed. She fumbled on the ground for anything she could grab and aimed it at the creature.

A twig caught the goblin's eye, and it howled as it clutched its face. Maxi pushed it off and scrambled away on her hands and knees.

The goblin was on her again before she could get to her feet. It yanked her back by her hair, and she thrashed against it as though she were drowning. Then, her vision turned black as it landed a brutal kick on her stomach. She desperately tried to cling to her fading consciousness. It would truly be the end if she were to pass out now.

The monster began dragging her along the forest floor by her hair. Struggling against it, Maxi unsheathed the dagger from her waist. She thrust the blade upward and felt it sink into flesh like half-cooked meat.

The goblin's large, burning eyes grew even bigger as it stared at its abdomen in disbelief. Then it began to shake her head violently.

Maxi yanked the dagger out and plunged it back in. Warm blood spewed out like a fountain, drenching her face and arms. Over and over, she stabbed the goblin's round belly in a frenzy. It took dozens of strikes before the monster's hands finally went limp.

Heaving ragged breaths, Maxi shakily sat up. Nausea washed through her as soon as she saw the monster's chest. It now resembled a chunk of meat. Turning her head, she hurled sticky bile over the base of a tree. Her throat burned, and her whole body ached as though all of her bones had been crushed.

Breathing was painful; she surmised that she had broken a rib. Clutching her side, she looked back along the path.

Where on earth am I?

Her mount had long since fled. Pressing her hand against the tree trunk for support, Maxi staggered to her feet. Strangely enough, she no longer felt afraid. Perhaps it was because her ability to cope had been stretched far beyond its limits.

She was numbly surveying her surroundings when she heard a gruff bellow in the distance. She staggered in the direction of the sound. Stepping out of the trees, she found herself on a dizzyingly steep cliff with a boulder overhang.

Maxi teetered to the edge and looked down to see thousands of monsters gathered at the barrier protecting the city gates.

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The terrifying sight made Maxi's skin crawl. She hugged herself as she took a step back.

Six gray giants with legs as thick as timbers charged from the head of the monster army. Their massive feet stomped on the ground as they swung iron maces. A thunderous roar rang out, followed by a blazing fireball that hurtled toward the barrier.

Maxi turned her gaze to the source of the attack. In the middle of the troll legion was a creature draped in black robes, riding a drake. There was no doubt that this was the necromancer behind Hebaron's curse, as well as the horde of ghouls.

The drake's reins were made of chains. The robed monster yanked them, then raised its black-scaled hands. An instant later, a massive fireball formed in the air.

The heat was so intense that Maxi blocked her face with her arm. The scarlet flame hurtled toward the barrier like an explosive, and the violent blast even reached the cliff where Maxi stood. She stayed flat on the ground until the fierce gust died down. Black smoke and dust cleared to reveal the half-melted barrier.

Ogres charged like a stampede of wildebeests once more, swinging their iron hammers. The heavy blows snapped Maxi to attention. This was no time to be watching the battle from afar like a fool.

Sitting on her knees, she searched for the boundary where dirt became rock. The boulder was more firmly embedded in the earth than she had anticipated. After tapping it with her foot, Maxi bit her lip.

The overhang was not as precarious as it had looked from below. Would she be able to push it off with magic?

There's nothing else I can do but try…

If she could create a small fissure, the rock would fall from its own weight.

Taking a few steps away from the boulder, Maxi placed her hands on the ground. She then circulated her mana along the pattern of the defensive rune. Her mana poured out of her pathways and dispersed left and right, forming an intricate shape. Soon, a faint tremor shook the ground. It cracked open as an earth wall shot up.

Maxi backed away to escape the thick dust that flew up with the wall. The boulder had not budged. Brushing away the strands of hair sticking to her forehead, Maxi gnawed her lip.

Her spell had been for a corporeal barrier that used the surrounding elements. Since it forced the earth to create a solid wall, it was bound to cause a mild disruption. Even so, it appeared that the quake had not been enough to dislodge the rock.

She called back her mana and stored it within her body. The earth wall crumbled like a sandcastle and filled the air with dust once more.

Without waiting for the dust to settle, she immediately summoned another wall. It would have been more efficient if she had formulated a new rune that would directly affect the surface of the soil, but she lacked the skill. Though casting barriers of dirt was a foolish method, it was her only option.

Maxi continued to circulate mana along the intricate lines of the defensive runes. A faint tremor shook the ground each time it opened for an earth wall to spring up. Even after multiple attempts, the boulder showed no sign of falling.

Sensing that her mana was almost completely drained, Maxi anxiously bit her lip. For all she knew, the bottom of the rock might extend far beneath the ground. If that were the case, she would have to summon a barrier hundreds of times to dislodge it.

Maxi clenched her fists. Had it been presumptuous of her to think that someone like her could make the Guardian of Eth Lene fall from where it had proudly stood for thousands of years?

But there is no other way…

The spells she knew were limited to the earth barrier spell, healing and restorative magic, and a spell to create sparks of fire.

She had no other option than to keep trying. In what felt like an attempt to smash a rock with an egg, Maxi repeated the process of summoning and breaking down her barrier. She had just finished her ninth attempt when she suddenly felt light-headed as if suffering heavy blood loss.

Maxi quickly withdrew her mana. Using her supply any further might lead to mana depletion. Out of breath and feeling dizzy, she looked up at the sky. The golden sunset almost made her feel resentful.

A crisp breeze brushed past her wet cheeks as she stared vacantly upward. Her whole body was aching, and her head felt empty. An uncontrollable tremor passed over her.

The result would have been different had it been Ruth or Princess Agnes standing on this cliff. If the squires had taken Ruth out of the city instead of her, he would have succeeded in striking fear into the monsters.

Utterly useless.

Her father's voice rang in her ears. He had been right. Though she had tried her best to be useful, she remained a worthless being incapable of doing anything. It had been foolish of her to think that she could solve this crisis with her incompetence.

Maxi's face contorted with despair. She felt as though a ball of fire was lodged in her throat. She was struggling to swallow the burning lump when a deafening crash rang out from below. Maxi leaped to her feet and peered down.

Eth Lene's remaining barrier was crumbling. A thunderous roar rose up from the monster army as they advanced toward the city.

Soldiers released a barrage of fire arrows, and mages hurled blazing flames from the ramparts. Faced with an enemy with regenerative powers, however, their attacks were not enough. Their opponents were essentially immortal.

The monsters rushed at the gates and began attacking. Filled with horror as she watched from afar, Maxi clenched her jaw and lowered her hands once more.

One last try. She would give it one last try.

She summoned her remaining mana and directed it to circulate along the pattern of the defensive rune. As mana flowed out of her, Maxi felt as though she were being drained of blood.

The ground shook and an earth wall fifteen kevettes [2] high shot up. Maxi accelerated the speed of her mana circulation. To cause a fissure deep enough to dislodge the rock, she would have to draw the wall even higher.

Elevating her barrier further and further, Maxi let out a threatening mutter, "Break!"

Despite dredging up the last of her mana and pouring it into the barrier, the boulder did not budge. Maxi struck the ground with her fists in frustration.

"W-Why won't you break?!"

Burning tears welled in her eyes. She was now out of mana. The moment the influx of her magical resource ended, the earth wall pitifully collapsed in a cloud of dust. She woefully eyed the remains.

Suddenly, a thud boomed below her. Maxi's eyes grew wide. Unable to bear the weight of the crumbling wall, the ground slowly began to tilt. Dirt and sand began to stream down toward the cliff edge. Maxi whirled away, but her legs were too weak for her to run properly.

As she desperately tried to escape the heaving earth, the cliff edge tilted further, and the ground began to crumble. The landslide swept into Maxi and sent her tumbling. Just as she was about to plunge down with the crumbling dirt, someone caught her arm. Maxi screamed as pain tore through her shoulder.

She looked up into Ulyseon's ashen face. He hauled her up and leaped over the sinking earth like a wild animal. Maxi forgot about the pain in her shoulder as he dragged her along to escape the collapsing ground.

Cursing under his breath, Ulyseon wound his arm around her waist and leaped into the air. Pain shot through her side, making her breath hitch. Ulyseon landed near a tree, as nimble as a cat, and clung to one of its thick branches. He pressed against the trunk to shield them from the landslide.

Maxi clung to him like a drowning person. A quake as powerful as the primordial schism of heaven and earth shook the ground, and booming thuds continued to reverberate for a long time. When it finally grew eerily quiet, Maxi opened her eyes.

It took a while to understand what had happened. Her blurred vision gradually regained focus, and the full extent of the landslide and crushed monsters came into view.

Maxi blinked in disbelief. When the boulder fell, it had caused the precariously leaning rock face to collapse. She heard Ulyseon's shocked voice above her head.

"By God…"

As though afraid he would drop her, Ulyseon's arm around her waist tightened painfully. He fought for breath.

"Do you see it, my lady? Half the monster army was crushed, and it closed off the southern route. The city should be able to hold out now until reinforcements arrive."

He could only speak in a shaky mumble.

Finally coming to his senses, he pulled Maxi up onto the cliff. Maxi clung to him, barely managing to clamber up the mountain of dirt. He excitedly chattered away as he ushered her to a safe area.

"That was amazing, my lady. Just incredible. But, we should still leave this place at once. The monsters will know where we are by now. If we don't find a place to hide soon—"

Ulyseon let out a low gasp. Maxi looked up at him with unfocused eyes and watched him hastily rip his cloak.

He reached out to clutch her face. "Heavens, y-you're bleeding…"

She remembered the goblin blood splattered over her. With great effort, she managed to open her mouth to explain.

"I-It's goblin blood. I-It got on me w-when…"

"No, my lady. It's—"

Without finishing his sentence, Ulyseon pressed the torn fabric to her nose. Only then did Maxi realize that something warm was streaming from it. The metallic tang of blood was on her lips; she must have been bleeding quite badly. Still, she was embarrassed at having shown Ulyseon such an unseemly sight.

Nausea washed over her, and she suddenly felt cold and dizzy. She realized that her limbs had been shaking for some time. The color drained from Ulyseon's face as he sensed that something was gravely wrong.

"You're bleeding a lot, my lady. Hold this against your nose until it stops."

With a trembling hand, Maxi managed to press the fabric beneath her nose. Ulyseon crouched down with his back to her.

"Let me carry you, my lady."

Remaining on her feet was already a struggle. Maxi obeyed the squire's direction and allowed him to carry her on his back. Ulyseon hoisted her with ease and darted through the trees like a winged creature.

"Hold on. I will find a safe place for us."

The squire's voice sounded distant. Stifling a moan, Maxi desperately clung to consciousness. She would only become more burdensome if she were to black out now. She was grappling with the little energy she had left when Garrow's voice called out.

"Uly! What happened?"

"Her ladyship destroyed the rock face, and I think it depleted her mana."

Garrow hurried over to them, mouth agape in astonishment.

"A-Are you all right, my lady?"

Maxi looked up at him with bleary eyes, and Garrow's pale face came into focus. How ghastly did she look for the squire to be pulling such an expression?

"We must hurry and get her ladyship to safety. The monsters saw us. Those that survived the landslide will be coming after us."

"Are we going east as planned?"

Ulyseon shook his head. "Her ladyship won't be able to endure the journey through the wilderness in her current condition. We have to return to Eth Lene Castle."

"But the battle…"

"The southern route was completely closed off by the landslide, and there are about a hundred monsters at most trapped between the city walls and a barricade of rocks. The remaining forces should

be able to handle them. The problem is the surviving monsters. It's difficult to predict what they'll do."

"How many of them survived?"

"Around six, seven hundred… No, I can't say for certain. More than half of them were crushed, but with their regenerative abilities, most will likely get back on their feet unless they were killed instantly."

Ulyseon lowered Maxi to the ground when they reached his horse. She whimpered in pain as her rib and shoulder made contact with the earth. Ulyseon gazed down at her as though he were at a loss for what to do.

"Do you think you can still ride, my lady?"

Maxi limply shook her head. "M-My left a-arm…"

It took a moment for the squire to realize that her left shoulder was dislocated. Biting his lip, he gingerly lifted her on his back again.

"We're going down on foot. Just take enough of the provisions."

"Are you sure?"

"If we can't ride the horses, it's better to abandon them. Don't you remember what Sir Riftan said? It's hard to erase horse tracks. The monsters would find us in no time."

Garrow unhitched their luggage from the saddle and freed the horses. They then began their hurried descent. Slumped on Ulyseon's back, Maxi had to fight past the searing pain tearing through her body.

This pain was greater than when her father had broken her back. It stabbed at her shoulder, and her ribs ached. Her knees were scraped, her buttocks were bruised from falling off her mount, and her limbs were fatigued… Every part of her throbbed, and shivers racked through her as though her veins flowed with ice water. Maxi whimpered as she trembled.

"Damn it, maybe we should find a safe spot to rest…" Ulyseon muttered anxiously.

"Her condition might worsen if we waste any more time. We have to take her to a healer as soon as possible."

"But she's in so much pain…"

Maxi’s lips quivered. Although she wanted to tell him that she was all right, the only thing that escaped her lips was a low rasp. The symptoms of mana depletion were growing worse; the coldness had now set in her bones. Sensing her agony, Ulyseon’s steps grew more urgent.

“This won’t do. We should at least splint her shoulder to lessen the pain. Search for a cave.”

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Ulyseon weaved through the trees with Maxi on his back. He bent down as much as he could to lessen the strain on her aching body.

Whenever her dangling arm swayed, the excruciating pain in her shoulder made her clench her jaw so tightly that she thought it might break. It occurred to her that fainting might be the less painful option, but the fear that she might never open her eyes again had her fighting to remain conscious.

Ahead, Garrow raised his arm and shouted, "Over here!"

When they caught up to him, Maxi saw a small cave hidden between twisted trees.

Garrow laid his cloak on the ground, and Ulyseon gingerly lowered Maxi onto it as though she were a fragile vase. Despite their efforts, Maxi still felt as though she were lying on a pile of burning coals.

She dripped in cold sweat, and she gnawed at the torn fabric she held against her bleeding nose.

Ulyseon looked down in bewilderment at her limp hand. "Garrow, w-what should we do? I think we'll have to reattach her shoulder…"

"But neither of us know how. It's not something we can just try. If we mess up, we might end up breaking bones or causing more pain. We should bind the arm for now to immobilize it as much as possible."

Sitting on his knees next to her, Garrow tore a long strip from his cloak. "This is going to hurt, my lady. Please try to bear it."

Fear washed over her as she watched the squire reach for her arm. The pain was unbearable even when lying still. The thought of someone moving her arm filled her with dread. Even so, she knew there was no other way.

Garrow gently folded her arm across her chest and used the torn strip to secure it in place. Maxi bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. The pain was so excruciating that her breath caught in her

throat. Seeing her reaction, Ulyseon hastily shrugged off the bag on his back.

"Hold on, my lady. There should be some restorative herbs here."

Ulyseon shakily pulled out a pouch and rummaged through it for the dried restorative. Maxi watched him with bleary eyes, then removed the fabric she had been holding on her face. Thankfully, the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

She wiped the blood from her face with the crumpled cloth. Ulyseon found the herb and broke it into smaller pieces, feeding them to her one by one. Although Maxi could not taste the restorative's bitterness as she chewed and swallowed, she felt sick the moment it passed down her throat. Gagging, Maxi regurgitated the unpleasant herb.

"My lady!"

The vomiting intensified the pain in her aching ribs. Ulyseon was close to tears as he watched her writhe in pain.

"I-I'm sorry, my lady. I shouldn't have given you the herbs…"

"This won't do. I think we'll have to risk being tracked and light a fire. She's too cold. The mana depletion symptoms are getting worse."

"I-I'll do it!"

"No, you keep watch. Your eyes are better than mine."

In a trance, Maxi was barely able to register their conversation as she wiped the sticky vomit from her mouth. After swaddling her in the cloak he had laid on the ground, Garrow went out to gather firewood.

Ulyseon slipped out of his cloak and bent down to cover her. He suddenly froze. Seeing his fellow squire turn to stone, Garrow threw him a perplexed glance.

"What's wrong?"

"There's blood…"

Was her nose bleeding again? Maxi forced her drooping eyelids open. Her blurred vision could only make out the darkening forest. It felt like she was trapped under dark water.

"Please pardon me, my lady."

Pushing a frozen Ulyseon aside, Garrow crouched next to her and pulled off the cloak. Unable to think straight, Maxi could not comprehend what they were doing. She lay slowly blinking her eyes.

Garrow felt the hem of her dress and took in a sharp breath. He quickly bundled her with the cloak once again and hoisted her onto his back.

"We must take her to a healer as soon as possible," he said, panicking. "She's losing too much blood."

"L-Let me carry her!"

"I'll be faster in the mountains. You guard the rear!"

True to his words, Garrow ran down the slope at a frightening speed. Each step he took felt like a horse kicking her chest, but Maxi no longer had the energy to moan. Her breaths came shallowly as she swayed like a doll on his back. Everything was growing faint. She could not even tell if her eyes were open or shut.

"Goddammit!" cried Ulyseon. "Trolls! They know we're here!"

Maxi's eyes fluttered. Something in the dark was charging after them, snarling. She soon heard the clash of steel.

"Keep running!" said Ulyseon.

The sound of the monsters' roars, grunts, and clanging steel continued. The thuds across the ground made Maxi break out in a cold sweat. As Garrow darted down the steep slope, it felt as though they were plummeting. The violent movement caused Maxi to briefly lose consciousness.

The next thing she knew, a hand was tapping her face. She had no idea how long she had been unconscious. Her eyes opened to find everything blanketed in darkness. She heard Ulyseon's breathless voice in the pitch-black night.

"You must stay awake, my lady, or your temperature will drop even further," he muttered, wrapping a cloak around her.

Though the pressure of Ulyseon's arm on her side was unbearable, she merely bobbed her head. He sat behind a rock to catch his breath and wrapped his arms around her to warm her as much as possible.

They continued their descent in haste, with Maxi drifting in and out of consciousness. Time passed either in agonizing flashes or

stretching eternities.

The squires traversed the dark forest without a moment of rest. The sound of their rhythmic footsteps, heavy breathing, and the bone-chilling cold were the only things Maxi's senses could register.

Why did their journey back feel so long when it had not been so the other way? She was vacantly mulling this over when she saw a far-off light.

"It's our cavalry!" Ulyseon exclaimed, sounding profoundly relieved. "They must have gotten our message."

Rushing out of the trees, he cried out, "Trolls in pursuit! We request protection!"

"Are you deserters?"

The voice was incongruously calm amidst the urgency of the situation. It sounded familiar, but Maxi could not place it. Still carrying her on his back, Ulyseon rushed over to the man and bent to one knee.

"We are squires of the Remdragon Knights," said Garrow. "Lady Calypse was gravely injured while we were traveling through the forest. Please help us!"

Maxi barely managed to open her eyes. In a haze, she could make out the figures holding torches on horseback. The knight at the head of the group dismounted, and his armor clinked as he approached them.

"We are about to go into battle. We can only offer emergency treatment."

"We would be grateful for any help! Her ladyship has lost a lot of blood."

There was a pause.

"Very well. I'll heal her with divine magic."

With that, the man knelt in front of her. When she felt the familiar energy seeping into her body, Maxi strained to see. An instant later, a stony face enveloped in silver light came into focus.

Maxi briefly met the man's eyes. They were green with light brown flecks. When it finally sunk in that this was the commander of the Temple Knights, she closed her eyes, relief flooding her. His presence meant that the coalition army had arrived earlier than expected.

They were saved.

As her tension drained away, she could no longer fight the all-consuming weariness. Maxi finally allowed her consciousness to slip under.

◆◆◆

Maxi was woken by the sound of sobbing. Slowly, she opened her heavy lids, blearily taking in the yellow tent ceiling above. Confusion washed over her. Had everything been a nightmare?

Unable to come to her senses, she blinked her dry eyes. The sobbing grew louder. Flinching, Maxi turned toward the sound and was met with a terrifying sight. A woman dressed in black knelt at the foot of the cot, tearing at her disheveled hair as she wailed.

Maxi screamed. The woman's form crumbled and dispersed like black ash.

"What's wrong, my lady?!"

Maxi gazed at the man that rushed into the tent. Sir Elliot Charon, who had left for battle with Riftan, was standing in front of her in full armor. The knight looked more surprised than she was. A moment later, he dashed out of the tent.

"Mage Ruth! Lady Calypse is awake!"

Maxi flinched and hunched over. When she realized that the pain was gone, she turned to inspect her shoulder. The arm which had dangled awkwardly at her side was now perfectly aligned. She touched it gingerly, amazed that it did not hurt at all. When had she been healed?

Ruth came running into the tent as she was swiveling her arm.

"You're awake, my lady. How are you feeling?"

The tension drained from her shoulders the moment she saw the sorcerer's face. It appeared that she had safely returned to Eth Lene Castle.

With a sigh of relief, Maxi opened her mouth to speak, but no sound escaped her parched throat. Ruth approached the cot and held a cup of water to her lips.

Maxi propped herself up and took a sip. When the cold water entered her stomach, her foggy consciousness grew clearer.

She slowly looked back and forth between Ruth and Sir Elliot before stammering in a raspy voice, "W-What about… the monsters?"

"Thanks to you blocking off the southern path, we were able to defeat them. The remaining men within the city dispatched the monsters trapped outside the ramparts, and the coalition army took care of the rest."

Placing the cup on a tray, Ruth pulled a chair next to her. Her relief evaporated when she saw his pale face. A chill ran down her spine as she suddenly remembered the wailing banshee at the foot of her cot.

"W-Was… anyone hurt? Where is… U-Ulyseon… and Garrow?"

"They are both well, my lady," Ruth said calmly. "They were injured during the fight with the monsters, but they've both recovered now. We were lucky. The Temple Knights came with the cavalry as soon as they received our message."

"W-What about Riftan?"

Ruth's face hardened. He ran his hand over his mouth and mumbled with a troubled expression, "The Remdragon Knights were on the frontlines. They immediately returned to Eth Lene after the Temple Knights. Sir Riftan came straight to see you the moment he arrived. Do you not remember, my lady?"

Maxi tried to sift through her hazy memories, but it only gave her a headache. She was unable to recall anything. When she slowly shook her head, Ruth let out a low sigh.

"I suppose it's not surprising. You've been unconscious for a week, my lady, barely more than a corpse." Ruth began to speak in rapid-fire, as though recounting the events made him angrier by the minute. "You had two broken ribs, bruising everywhere, and your left shoulder was completely dislocated. And if that weren't enough, not only were you suffering from severe mana depletion, but you—"

Ruth cut himself off, roughly rubbing his forehead. He started again in a much calmer voice.

"Things could've gone terribly wrong if you had not met the Temple Knights when you did. Sir Riftan practically went mad with worry."

"I-I'm sorry… I just…" Maxi murmured, her face ashen.

Her heart sank as she imagined Riftan's reaction. Seeing her expression, Ruth hung his head wearily.

"I'm not chastising you, my lady. If you had not made that landslide, everyone at Eth Lene Castle would have been massacred. If anything, I should be thanking you."

Contrary to his words, however, Ruth appeared conflicted. After glaring at her as though he had much to say, he heaved a sigh and shook his head.

"I think I've said too much when you've only just woken up. I'll go get some porridge. In the meantime, try not to think too much and rest. I've been infusing you with restorative magic regularly, but you'll still be feeling weak. You haven't had any food for a week."

"W-Where is… Riftan?"

Ruth stiffened. He regarded her gloomily for a moment before replying curtly, "He's in a strategy meeting. He should be back soon."

Maxi swallowed past her dry throat. She was scared that Riftan might be angry. Out of habit, she slipped her hand into her pocket intending to clutch the coin when she realized that someone had changed her clothes. She anxiously ran her hands over her new dress.

Ruth gazed down at her, mumbling uneasily, "I've served Sir Riftan for a long time, but I've never seen him so distraught. He was like a madman."

Chapter 165

Maxi bunched the blanket in her fists, wondering just how distraught Riftan must have been to make this sorcerer with nerves of steel uneasy.

Realizing he had said something he should not have, Ruth hastily said, "You need not worry, my lady. You are the hero of this war. Even if Sir Riftan were to get angry at you, the whole of Eth Lene would step in to stop him. And if need be, I'll come to your defense. I've served him for a long time, I doubt he'd kill me."

The attempt at idle chatter barely eased the worry etched on Maxi's face.

Ruth scratched the back of his head. "Come to think of it, I have yet to offer my gratitude. Thank you, my lady. We owe you our lives."

Taken aback, Maxi waved him off. "No need to thank me. I-I am just… glad everyone is safe."

Ruth's lips suddenly twisted into a sad smile. Before Maxi could ask about the reason behind it, he was making his way out of the tent.

The short exchange had been exhausting, and Maxi slumped on the cot. She could not believe that she had been unconscious for a week. Though all of her injuries seemed to have healed, her limbs felt limp and her head heavy.

After a while spent staring at the ceiling with bleary eyes, she forced herself up in an attempt to revive what energy she could. As if on cue, she heard hurried footsteps outside. Two female clerics rushed into the tent.

"Lady Calypse!"

Maxi beamed when she saw a teary-eyed Idsilla and Selina, and she sighed with relief. Both of them were alive.

Idsilla approached the cot and propped Maxi up with a thick cushion. She immediately began to chide her.

"You mustn't try to get up on your own yet. What if you fall over?"

"I-I was… just trying to sit up."

"If you need something, call for someone to help you. You've just woken up. You shouldn't try to move on your own for a while."

Idsilla continued her nagging as she pulled the blanket up to Maxi's chin.

Selina placed a tray beside the head of the cot and said gently, "I made you some light porridge. The herbs are mild, but they should help with energy recovery."

"Th-Thank you."

Maxi studied her as she took the proffered spoon. She had worried when Selina had disappeared during the chaos, but the female cleric must have found a safe hiding place.

However, Maxi's happiness was short-lived. The tide might have turned in their favor, but it had still ended up being a large-scale battle with a great number of casualties.

"H-How are things… at the infirmary?"

"Many were wounded, but they're in a stable condition now thanks to the mages." Scooping the porridge into a small bowl, Idsilla pulled a stern expression. "Please worry about getting well first, Lady Calypse. We will manage the infirmary, so you mustn't be too concerned."

Clutching her bowl, Maxi glanced about nervously. Though she wanted to inquire after everyone else, particularly whether any of the Remdragon Knights were injured, she did not wish to trouble them when they were already so busy. Blowing on the steaming porridge, Maxi quietly ate her meal.

When she was done, Idsilla hid the cot behind a partition and wiped Maxi's perspiring face, hands, and back. Though it was slightly embarrassing, Maxi did not express discomfort and meekly submitted to their care. She had administered the same treatment for the wounded men hundreds of times after all.

"W-Which reminds me… who changed my clothes?"

"It was me, and the female clerics took turns tending to you," Selina replied as she helped Maxi into a new dress she had taken from a small chest.

Thoroughly worn out from the effort of changing, Maxi slumped back onto the cushion and asked hesitantly, "Did you perhaps… find a small coin in m-my clothes? There should have been… a c-copper shekel in the robe pocket…"

"A coin?"

Dark clouds converged in Maxi's heart when Selina cocked her head. The coin could have fallen out during her desperate escape from the monsters. She remembered stumbling several times. Her mouth went dry at the possibility that she had lost an item Riftan had carried with him since he was a youth.

"C-Can I check my clothes? Th-The coin was from my husband. H-He gave it to me… It was his talisman…"

Selina's expression grew troubled. "They were probably burned because they were so dirtied…"

Maxi's face fell.

Seeing her expression, Idsilla folded her arms and said optimistically, "Everyone's been so preoccupied that they may have put your clothes aside and forgotten all about them. I'll check for you."

"I-I don't want to trouble—"

"You mustn't say such things! It's not even that much of a—"

Idsilla's voice cracked. She coughed lightly to conceal her emotions and, shepherding Selina along with her, hurried out of the tent with the wet towel, basin, and empty tray. Maxi sipped at the porridge a few more times before falling asleep again.

A short while later, Idsilla returned. Her bouncing footsteps awoke Maxi from her restless sleep. She looked up at the girl with a mixture of hope and unease. With a grin, Idsilla held out a copper coin rimmed with soot.

"The soldiers found this in the ashes. I tried washing it with water, but the soot refuses to come off completely."

Maxi accepted the coin, looking both apologetic and relieved.

"I-I didn't know… it would require so much effort. I apologize f-for troubling you… when you are already busy looking after the wounded."

"Stop! It was no trouble at all. Everyone gladly searched the ashes when I told them it was important to you," Idsilla said, shrugging her shoulders as though she were talking about something trivial. "Everyone is grateful. They would have scoured the mountains for you."

Maxi's face fell as she brushed the rough surface of the coin. Idsilla's words made her feel conflicted. Toppling that boulder was a feat she had accomplished while abandoning the city to save her own life.

Burdened by the admiration in the girl's eyes, Maxi looked away. Though a part of her felt guilty, she could not bring herself to tell the truth. She was afraid that everyone would spurn her for it.

"Could you… th-thank the men for me?"

"I will. You, on the other hand, should lie down now. I'll return with more porridge later. If you need anything, please ring this bell at any time."

After cheerfully acting the part of maidservant, Idsilla left the tent once more. Maxi lay back on the cot and fiddled with the coin. It was more dented than she remembered, and one side was completely blackened.

She rubbed the surface to wipe off what soot she could. Then, overcome with exhaustion, she closed her eyes and fell into a deep slumber.

She was floating in hazy consciousness when she suddenly felt something touch her face. Her eyes fluttered open to find Riftan standing beside the cot. How long had he been there?

All sleepiness dissipated when she saw his blank face. Maxi sat up, anxiously studying him.

Riftan looked as frightening as the day of their reunion at Croyso Castle. Dressed in a navy-blue tunic and the oddly forbidding dark-gray armor of the Remdragon Knights, his sharp face was strained, and a strange tension lurked behind his icy gaze.

The cold-blooded knight who had so terrified her looked down without a word. His calmness was petrifying.

He silently swept the tangled hair off her forehead with no indication of anger or concern. His gaze then fell on her overlapping hands beside the pillow. Maxi's face flushed when she realized that he was looking at the coin.

"I-I'm sorry for not taking better care… o-of something so important…"

For a brief second, Maxi saw anger flash behind his dark eyes. Sensing that he was trying to hold back, Maxi curled herself into a ball. Instead of yelling as she had expected, however, he merely picked up the coin in her palm with a frighteningly calm expression. He tossed it on the ground.

The coin clinked as it rolled into the corner of the tent. Watching it with a vacant expression, Riftan muttered in a gruff voice, "As if such a thing really works…"

The blood drained from Maxi's face.

After staring at the ground for a long while, Riftan calmly went on as though nothing had happened. "In two days, Princess Agnes will return to the capital with the royal guards. You will go with her to Drachium Castle."

"B-But… the war isn't—"

"The tides have turned. The monster leading the army was crushed beneath the landslide." A smile tugged at his lips. "A pathetic death for a creature that managed to lead an invasion of this size."

He sounded peeved that the monster had died so easily. He was clearly trying to suppress his anger as he continued tightly, "The Royal Knights of Livadon, the Temple Knights of Osiriya, and a portion of the combined forces of Wedon and Balto should be enough to defeat the remaining monsters. After monitoring the situation for two more days, Princess Agnes will return to Drachium, and you will go with her. The princess has promised me that she will keep you safe at all costs."

"Then… w-what about you… and the Remdragon Knights?"

"A select few of the Remdragon Knights will accompany you. Ursuline and Elliot have volunteered."

Running his hand over his mouth, Riftan finally looked at her. It was as if his eyes were veiled behind dark drapes.

"Duke Aren has offered his personal carriage, so your journey back shouldn't be too hard."

"W-Will you… remain here?"

He did not reply, but his silence was all the answer she needed.

After anxiously biting her lip, Maxi plucked up the courage and said, "Th-Then I will also—"

"Go!"

He yelled so suddenly that Maxi recoiled. Riftan's muscular torso heaved. His large body trembled as though he could no longer contain himself, and he lowered his head in his hand.

"Please, just go… I want you to leave this place…" Riftan choked, his body swaying like a rampart about to come crumbling down.

Maxi reached out to him. Riftan backed away as if she wielded a knife, and his face contorted with pain.

"I can't… bear to have you here any longer. I'm begging you. Just go."

An angry admonishment would have been a hundred times better.

Riftan's gaze contained the pain of a man torn to pieces. When he slowly closed his eyes and hung his head, Maxi found herself unable to say another word.

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Two days later, reports came that the coalition army had managed to drive all the monsters north. The Royal Army of Wedon, as well as a portion of the common soldiers, promptly began preparations for their return to Drachium.

Knights from Osiriya and Livadon were tasked with transporting those who could no longer fight to safe cities. A number of female clerics as well as two high priests also joined the large return party.

It worried Maxi that so many were leaving when the war had not yet ended.

"The best of our knights should be enough, Maximilian," said Princess Agnes as she laid Maxi on a bed prepared inside their luxurious carriage. "While you were unconscious, the Remdragon Knights pursued the retreating trolls. That caused the Baltonian army to get competitive, and they also joined the fray. We practically managed to destroy half of the monster army within a week."

Still anxious, Maxi gazed up at the princess's sky-blue eyes. This massive monster army had materialized the last time they had supposedly succeeded in driving all the monsters north.

As if reading her mind, Princess Agnes smiled bitterly. "The mages found the entrance to a maze concealed at the foot of the rock face when they were investigating the landslide. The monsters must have been hiding there."

"A-At the foot of the rock face?" Maxi asked in shock.

Princess Agnes nodded. "Seeing as even the inhabitants of Eth Lene weren't aware of it, it must have been made long ago. The monsters were using it as their secret base."

Maxi shuddered. That meant thousands of monsters had been hiding right beneath their noses.

It is dark under the oil lamp.

The fitting phrase came to Maxi's mind. Princess Agnes's beautiful face crumpled as if ruminating on the matter also chilled her.

"They probably hid a portion of their army there before the coalition army recaptured Eth Lene Castle. A total of two thousand monsters were hiding in the maze, waiting for the chance to strike."

The princess's lips curled into a rueful smile.

"And we blindly fell into their trap. We clearly underestimated their intelligence."

Chapter 166

"W-Will it be… all right this time?"

"With their commander and tactician gone, the monster army is falling apart. A sizable troll army remains camped up north, but this war should still be over soon."

The creases between Maxi's brows refused to unknit despite the princess's reassurance. Looking ill at ease herself, Agnes shrugged.

"It seems the coalition army has lost your trust completely."

"I-It's not that I don't trust them…"

The princess gave her a mischievous smile.

"Don't worry. Being thoroughly fooled by the monsters has snapped the coalition army to its senses. And perhaps it's because they saw the full extent of a Remdragon Knight rampage, but even the Baltonians have been quiet lately." The princess wrinkled her nose. "Then again, I doubt anyone's stupid enough to get on Riftan's nerves right now. I've never seen him like that, not even during the Dragon Campaign…"

Pressing her lips together, Maxi slipped her hand into her pocket and fiddled with the copper coin. She had immediately retrieved it from the corner the moment Riftan had left the tent.

Her heart panged as she recalled how he had thrown an item he had carried with him for more than a decade with such apathy.

Seeing Maxi's dark expression, Princess Agnes attempted to lighten the mood.

"For now, you should stop thinking about the war and focus on getting better," she said cheerfully. "You've done more than enough, Maximilian. You should allow yourself to rest."

"Thank you… for everything, Your Highness."

"There's no need for that."

With a kind smile, the princess pulled the blanket up to Maxi's chin. Maxi blushed. It embarrassed her that everyone was treating

her like a mortally wounded patient. After all, untold numbers of soldiers had suffered greater injuries than hers. Compared to those who had lost limbs, a dislocated shoulder and fractured ribs were not that dire.

Her body had been extremely slow in regaining energy. They had infused her with restorative magic several times, but she always felt tired. Perhaps it was a side-effect of mana depletion.

Maxi rubbed her throbbing forehead. Moments later, she heard a loud cry from outside the carriage.

"We're all set to depart!"

Princess Agnes climbed out to inspect the return party one last time. Soon, a trumpet blast signaled their departure.

When the princess returned to the carriage, she obliged Maxi's request to be propped up with a cushion. Maxi looked out the window in search of Riftan, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Maxi bit her lip. Was he going to let her go without a farewell? Dread and disappointment filled her heart.

His anger was understandable. Her current state was thanks to her reckless actions, in direct defiance to his pleas. Even so, if she had not done what she had, Eth Lene Castle would have fallen to the monsters. And she had survived, had she not?

Wounds can be healed with magic. Getting a little hurt is nothing to worry about…

Maxi's face fell. Remembering the pain in Riftan's eyes, she felt guilty for having such thoughts. Her shoulders sagged as confusion and disappointment engulfed her.

Just then, she saw someone running up to the carriage. Maxi's eyes grew wide in surprise.

Jogging alongside the slow-moving coach, Ulyseon said through the window, "My lady, I wanted to ask for your forgiveness before you left. Please forgive me for failing to protect you."

Maxi stared at the squire in shock before waving her hands. "Th-That is not true. I am here now… because of your protection, and Garrow's. I would have suffered a worse fate if not for you two."

"My lady…"

Ulyseon bit his lip, his brow furrowing. His expressive purple eyes glistened with tears.

Flustered, Maxi forced a bright smile on her face. "Don't give me that look. I will be… b-back to full health before you know it. So… you must also return in good health, Ulyseon."

Ulyseon's mouth flapped open and closed as if to say something, but he eventually hung his head. Maxi's expression grew troubled when she saw how guilt-ridden he looked.

The young man was seventeen. Even if he was a genius swordsman, he was still a mere boy. And yet, he had so gallantly protected her. She was about to tell him this when the carriage abruptly picked up speed.

Maxi swayed on her makeshift bed. Ulyseon tried to keep up with them before stopping dead in his tracks. Maxi stared at his forlorn figure until he disappeared behind the crowd.

Princess Agnes shuffled over to her side and pointed out the window. "People over there have come to see you off as well."

Maxi looked over and saw the female clerics gathered on a hill. Idsilla stood waving both arms at the front of the group, a handkerchief fluttering like a flag in one hand. Maxi's lips curled into a small smile.

The girl had turned down Maxi's offer of leaving with them, saying that she would return with her brother. Saddened by the fact that this could be the last time they saw each other, Maxi waved back until the female clerics disappeared into the landscape.

When they finally passed through the city gates, Princess Agnes made Maxi lie down again.

"Since the southern route was completely cut off, we'll ride through the northern valley, then travel around the rock face. The Remdragon Knights have agreed to guard us until then. The chances of a monster attack are as slim as the sky splitting in half, so be rest assured and try to sleep."

Maxi closed her eyes, relaxing when she heard that Riftan was accompanying them.

She did not know how long she slept, but she was awakened by someone shaking her shoulder. Princess Agnes helped her up and

pointed out the window.

"This is where we part ways with the Remdragon Knights. Would you like me to call Riftan for you?"

Her eyes still hazy with sleep, Maxi gazed at the knights lined up on the golden-brown field. At the head of the group, Riftan removed his helmet and held it at his side. The wind whipped at his black hair.

She waited for him to ride over to the carriage, but Riftan remained motionless atop his imposing black horse. He merely gazed impassively at the coach. Remembering his violent trembling the night before, Maxi could not bring herself to ask for him. She slowly shook her head.

"N-No. We have already… said our goodbyes."

The princess regarded her for a moment before lowering the shutter and signaling for the party to set out again. Maxi tried to imprint his receding figure in her mind. As he grew more distant, Maxi felt a deep shadow engulf her heart.

You'll come to get me soon, won't you?

She asked him earnestly with her eyes, but she saw no answer on his face. Maxi clutched the copper coin. For a brief moment, she thought he would come after her as he had in Levan when he had given her the coin. This time, however, Riftan remained as still as a stone on the field.

Maxi tried to blink away her tears. A crisp breeze that smelled of autumn tugged at the Remdragon Knights' cloaks.

Before she knew it, the most tempestuous and painful summer of her life had come to an end.

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It appeared that the coalition army had truly succeeded in driving the monsters north this time. Not once was the return party attacked on their journey back to Levan.

In retrospect, Maxi could have simply been unaware of an ambush. She had slept like a corpse during the length of the

journey. It was a new day each time she opened her eyes. Yet, her tiredness seemed to remain no matter how much she slept.

She felt as powerless as a newborn. Magic could not heal the symptoms of mana depletion, so there was nothing she could do except wait for her body to recuperate on its own.

After more than ten days of doing nothing but eating and sleeping, she was well enough to walk when they arrived at Levan. As soon as she stepped out of the carriage, she went straight to retrieve Rem from the basilica. The mare had been neglected for nearly two months; she stomped her hooves the moment she saw Maxi.

Ursuline leaped in to take the reins. "It's likely disgruntled from being locked in the stables for so long. Try to keep your distance until it calms down."

Maxi nodded and backed away. The icy knight no longer looked at her with disdain, but Maxi still found their interactions difficult. Ursuline skillfully soothed the agitated horse, then glanced at Maxi's complexion.

"Since the weather is good, I think we'll be able to sail back to Wedon without delay. Is there anything else you wish to take with us?"

"N-No…"

Maxi swept her gaze about, trying to think. Although she wanted to say her farewells to the noblewomen who remained at the basilica, she had told them she had gone to stay with Idsilla at one of her family's villas. Not wanting to cause problems for the girl, Maxi opted to leave as discreetly as possible.

They took a carriage to the port, where a ship bearing the royal insignia of Wedon waited for them. Maxi climbed aboard with Elliot's assistance. Princess Agnes had been supervising the soldiers transporting the luggage, and she rushed over to Maxi as soon as she spotted her.

"Maximilian! You look pale. You could have asked the soldiers to retrieve your horse for you…"

"I am a-all right. Abandoning her… was weighing on my mind all this time."

Maxi gently stroked Rem's mane. The mare snorted and shook her head, clearly still sulky. A small smile tugged at Maxi's lips as she watched the horse.

Agnes drew Maxi toward the stairs at the center of the ship. "Now, come this way. The servants will take your mount to the stables. It's time for you to take your remedy and get some sleep."

"But… I've been doing nothing but sleep."

Maxi's brow furrowed slightly. She did not like being treated like a child. The princess smiled as if to placate her.

"You aren't suffering from simple mana depletion, Maximilian. You even used the mana you were born with. Simply put, you poured out your life force. It will take a while for you to fully recover. You shouldn't push yourself for the time being."

Elliot, who had been quietly standing beside Maxi, seemed to concur. "You should do as Her Highness suggests, my lady. You do not look well."

With a sigh, Maxi obediently descended the stairs. The princess led her to an opulent cabin fit for a king. After eating a small portion of porridge and drinking brewed mandrago root, Maxi lay on the bed. Shortly after, a trumpet blast announced their departure.

Maxi thought back on the events that had occurred over the past season. Everything felt like an extended dream. Her life at Croyso Castle, at Calypse Castle, and in a campaign… It astonished her again when she realized just how dramatic her stagnant life had become after her reunion with Riftan.

Only after I met you did I learn what it's like to be alive…

Riftan's pained expression suddenly came to mind, and Maxi quickly drove it out. She did not want to think about anything at the moment. She was simply too tired. It was as though she had aged decades in the past few days.

Maxi made a concerted effort to focus on the distant sound of the waves before drifting off to sleep once more.

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Drachium, the capital of Wedon, was located in the north of the kingdom. Since it was much closer to the port than Anatol was, it only took them five days to reach the gates.

The city seemed to be transitioning to autumn. Maxi looked over the magnificent sight and thought to herself that it was indeed a place worthy of Rosetta's love. Her sister had always appreciated grandeur.

They passed through the imposing gates onto a road wide enough for eight carriages to ride abreast. Sophisticated stone buildings lined the road on either side.

Princess Agnes began giving her an introduction to the city as Maxi absentmindedly watched the scene roll by. There was a theater, an armory, a horse-racing stadium, and so on.

Maxi nodded and offered lackluster responses. Though all the structures were striking, she found herself strangely unimpressed.

Chapter 167

"You must be tired," Agnes remarked with a grin when she noticed Maxi's lukewarm reaction.

Maxi flushed. "N-No. In fact, I feel bad… that I was able to travel in comfort while everyone else could not."

"Nonsense. Have you forgotten that you're a patient? Traveling by carriage for so long is no easy task either."

Leaning an elbow on the window sill, the princess let out a small sigh.

"I considered staying near the ports until you fully recovered, but I thought it best to have the royal healer take a look at you as soon as possible…"

She trailed off, her long fingers tapping the sill.

Maxi frowned when she saw the princess's dark expression. Maxi had received the utmost care throughout their journey from Eth Lene Castle to Drachium. Two maidservants and a healer had been with her at all times on the ship, and she had done nothing but sleep in comfort on a lavish cot prepared inside the carriage.

In truth, Maxi found it all rather excessive. She felt uncomfortable whenever the princess treated her like a gravely ill patient.

"I'm just… feeling a l-little listless," Maxi said awkwardly. "I've rested well for weeks… and I've been taking my curatives on time. I-I really am all right now."

"Even so, I still want a skilled healer to take a look at you. Drachium Castle has a high mage from the Mage Tower who is learned in the healing arts of the Southern Continent. I'm sure he will be a help to your recovery."

Maxi was about to speak again but gave up when she saw the princess's determined expression. There was no reason for her to refuse. Though she was wary of the princess's scrupulous care, Maxi meekly bobbed her head.

"Oh, you can see the castle now."

Agnes pointed out the window at a magnificent, light-gray castle built entirely in the ancient Roemian style. Maxi stared at the distant spire that rose like a giant's spear above the pointed, red brick tile roofs. Though Drachium Castle was not as opulent as her father's, Maxi could tell at first glance that it was bigger.

The carriage rolled past the crowd who had gathered to watch the procession. When they entered a large, circular courtyard, the soaring bell tower of a church and the arched castle entrance came into view.

The soldiers atop the walls turned the pulley to raise the iron bars over the entryway. Maxi peered out the window at the knights on their warhorses filing through the gate.

A vast garden lined with shrubs greeted them as the carriage finally entered the castle grounds. Maxi's eyes grew wide. The castle itself was far bigger than she had imagined.

Despite having spent twenty years in Croyso Castle, considered one of the most opulent structures in the west, she could not help but be astonished by the grandeur of Drachium.

"First, we must present ourselves to the king, then I'll take you to my palace."

When they finally reached the castle, the princess leaped out of the carriage before the servants could even get to the door.

Maxi regarded the princess's outstretched hand with a troubled expression. "Y-Your palace?"

"My residence is a detached palace behind the main castle. The use of magic is prohibited inside castle walls, so His Majesty had it built a fair distance away. It was his gift to me on my thirteenth birthday. Now then, shall we get going?"

At the princess's urging, Maxi reluctantly took the offered hand and stepped out of the carriage. Ursuline and Elliot let out a sigh at the sight.

"Your Highness, please allow us to escort Lady Calypse."

"Maximilian is my guest. It is only right that I tend to her."

Ignoring the troubled knights, the princess led Maxi toward a flight of stairs. Bewildered, Maxi followed the princess. They stopped

before a pair of imposing doors inlaid with hundreds of glass windows.

A row of royal knights clad in steel plate armor stood guard in front of the oval entrance. Inside, servants dressed in expensive silks greeted them. The royal guards and mages in the princess's entourage followed her as she strode through.

Maxi glanced around the strangely quiet hall. Beautiful statues stood between stone pillars, and golden chandeliers on the arched ceiling illuminated everything below. They passed through the lavish foyer and stopped in front of the audience chamber.

"Her Royal Highness, Princess Agnes Drachina Reuben, has returned with her royal guards!" announced the servant standing at the entrance.

The arched mahogany doors swung open to reveal a red carpet leading up to the King of Wedon sitting on his throne. He was dressed in intricately embroidered silk, with an impressive cape made of leopard fur draped over his shoulders. His expression was one of boredom, and he sat crookedly on the throne. For a man hailed as a wise leader, King Reuben III looked far too cold and uncaring.

His demeanor was nothing like what Maxi had expected. He had a regal yet enigmatic air about him. A lion's mane of dirty blond hair stuck out beneath his crown, and his golden beard was unkempt. His skin appeared astonishingly smooth and firm for his age. Something about him reminded Maxi of a lazy cat.

The king handed a roll of parchment to the official next to him. Both of his broad hands were bedecked with rings, which he outstretched in greeting.

"At last, our prized treasure has returned safely. A warm welcome back to our upholders of honor."

"Your Majesty. We have returned from our voyage having successfully carried out your commands."

Princess Agnes approached the throne and knelt to kiss the hem of the king's cape, which stretched down to the dais. The royal knights and mages also got to their knees to pay their respects. Maxi hastily followed suit, bowing her head.

The king's languid voice rang out above her head. There was a touch of displeasure in it.

"Raise your heads. You know I prefer to have conversations face to face."

Not wanting to be insolent, Maxi threw furtive glances about her and only looked up when she saw Ursuline and Elliot do the same.

Leaning his elbow on the throne's armrest, King Reuben III swept an indifferent gaze over the people knelt before him.

His husky voice was low as he said, "It seems you have lost many of your numbers."

"A third of our forces are still in Livadon as the war has yet to end completely."

"Who remains?"

"The Remdragon Knights and most of the knights from the western and northern regions of the kingdom, Your Majesty. All of them should be back within a month."

The king's golden eyes passed over the knights before stopping abruptly on Maxi. Maxi gulped, certain that her heart would stop. The king was strangely intimidating despite his easygoing manner.

"If I'm not mistaken, is that not the armor of the Remdragon Knights?"

Ursuline and Elliot promptly bowed their heads again at the king's address.

"I am Elliot Charon of the Remdragon Knights, Your Majesty."

"And I am Ursuline Ricaydo of the Remdragon Knights, Your Majesty. We are here following Sir Riftan Calypse's orders to safely escort Lady Calypse to Drachium Castle."

"Lady Calypse?"

The king's keen eyes fixed on Maxi. A brief moment of terror flashed through her.

She gulped and managed to calmly state, "I-It is… an honor, Your Majesty. I am Maximilian Calypse."

"Hmm."

King Reuben's golden eyes instantly grew cold. Maxi felt as though she were kneeling in front of a lion wearing the guise of a human. He stroked his curly beard as his lips twisted into a frown.

"So, you are the reason for that impudent knight's repeated rejections."

Icy tension instantly fell over the audience chamber at the king's barbed words. Maxi blanched and hurriedly bowed her head. Agnes quickly came to Maxi's defense.

"Father, Lady Calypse is a mage and the greatest contributor to the battle at Eth Lene. We rushed her to the capital because she was gravely injured during the battle."

"How interesting."

Contrary to his words, King Reuben's expression seemed disinterested.

"Riftan Calypse is the pride of Wedon and our most favored knight. It wouldn't do for us to neglect his wife. We will make sure you have everything you need, so make yourself at home."

Maxi fought through her shaky voice to reply. "I-I thank you for your generosity… Your Majesty."

Like a cat grown bored of its toy, the king looked away from her and gracefully waved a hand at his subjects.

"I do wish to hear more, but it would be cruel of me to hold you here when you've just returned from an arduous war. You can give your reports later. I will order a lavish banquet tonight in your honor."

The official jotted down the king's command and handed the parchment to a waiting servant, who rushed out of the audience chamber. The return party bowed to the king in unison and quietly left the room. Maxi waited until the doors shut behind them to start breathing again.

Seeing Maxi's ashen face, Agnes gave her a wry smile. "His Majesty has a nasty habit of making others feel ill at ease. He was only trying to get to you, so don't worry too much about it, Maximilian."

Her reassurance did not help Maxi feel any better. After all, King Reuben was the very man who had wanted Riftan to divorce her and marry the princess. It was only natural that the king would consider her a thorn in his side. Maxi anxiously bit her lip.

Ursuline, who had been silently observing her, spoke up. "You need not worry. The king is a benevolent man, he would never harm you out of spite."

Maxi gave him a cryptic smile. Nothing about the king had seemed benevolent to her. As if reading her mind, Agnes chuckled.

"He might be ill-tempered, but he is fair in his own way. He would certainly commend you when he learns of your contribution. Don't worry, I'll be sure to tell him."

Outside the main castle, they once again climbed into the carriage. Drachium Castle was vast enough to fit a small village. They passed through a chapel, a large military training ground that could easily accommodate more than ten thousand men, and a dense forest of elm trees.

By the time Maxi finally got to her room at the princess's residence, she was thoroughly spent. Her accommodation was a spacious and comfortably furnished bedchamber overlooking an orchard and a reservoir.

"Why don't you lie down and rest while I get the healers for you?"

"Th-There is no rush, Your Highness. You must be t-tired from the journey as well…"

"I promised Riftan that I would provide you with the utmost care. I'm doing this for my own honor, so never you mind."

The princess quickly returned with two female healers. Maxi lay stiffly on the bed, blinking up at the ceiling, while the women studied her complexion and pressed different spots on her abdomen.

One of the healers asked her questions before brewing a decoction of more than a dozen herbs in a ceramic kettle.

Maxi dubiously eyed the foul-smelling black tonic. "What k-kind of… remedy is this? I-I've never seen any of these herbs before…"

"It aids recovery," the princess quickly answered for the healer. "Rest assured that all of the herbs that go in it are of great benefit to the body."

Maxi wanted to inquire further but held back. The princess would be just as exhausted. Closing her eyes, she gulped down the bitter tonic. The healers continued the strange treatment regimen, placing

a pouch of heated stones under her blanket and applying a strangely-scented oil to her hands and feet.

They were almost finished when an unfamiliar voice sounded outside the door.

"Please pardon my intrusion, but I come to answer the princess's summons…"

Agnes turned and called for the person to come in. The door opened onto a scrawny man in his mid-forties. He wore a dark gray robe, and his unkempt beard bristled as he strode into the room.

"I heard some imbecile managed to squeeze out every bit of mana in their body. So, who is it? Let me see this fool. I've come prepared with a good sermon."

"Simon, I will not tolerate any rudeness."

The princess gave the man a stern look, but he remained unperturbed. The man named Simon snorted and turned to regard Maxi with critical eyes.

"Clearly not a pupil of the Mage Tower. Might I ask what kind of dimwit taught you magic to make you think it was all right to do something so foolhardy?"

"I-I…"

"Simon."

The mage pursed his lips at the warning in the princess's tone and pulled a chair next to the bed. "Yes, yes, I understand. She is an esteemed guest, so I will stop my nagging and assess her condition. Please give me your hand."

When Maxi hesitantly reached out, the man took her hand with bony fingers. She felt him infuse her with a bit of his own mana. Maxi shuddered as the cold energy seeped into her body. He continued to infuse her for about ten minutes before releasing her with a sigh.

"You're not as gravely depleted as I first suspected. Even so, I'm going to prescribe at least a month of bed rest."

"She will make a full recovery, then?" said the princess.

The mage blinked his owl-like eyes and heaved another sigh. "Yes. In her current condition, her body will naturally recuperate on its

own. However, she must not use magic until she has fully regained her energy, or it may lead to permanent damage."

"W-What do you mean… by permanent damage?"

"It could decrease your lifespan," said the mage, his voice low.

Maxi flinched. The mage crossed his arms, his expression growing grave as if to convey that this was not an exaggeration.

"All beings are born with mana inside them, but mages are able to gather the mana present in nature at will and make it their own. It is our bodies' inherent mana that serves as a magnet to store this additional mana. Not only did you drain yourself of your surplus, you've also used a portion of the energy every human must retain at all times. It is an act that cuts short one's own life."

"I-It was not intentional. It was a dire situation… a-and I only did what I could…"

The mage sighed at her mumbled excuse.

"Well, you certainly aren't the first mage to act recklessly in battle, my lady," he muttered bitterly. He shook his head and rose to his feet. "At present, your body is as feeble as an infant's. That is the reason you're constantly drowsy. Let your body have as much sleep as it demands so you can regain your energy. You mustn't exert yourself until you are completely well."

Maxi nodded. After dispensing more instructions, the mage left the room. Finally, when the princess and the healers left as well, Maxi was able to rest.

Even after arriving in Drachium Castle, all Maxi did was eat and sleep like an infant. From time to time, she would drink the tonic brewed for her by the healers, or allow a cleric to infuse her with restorative magic. Although it appeared that the main castle hosted a banquet every night, Maxi never stepped outside the princess's residence. Not only was she always tired, but she was not in the mood for noisy gatherings.

Even though she was now free from life in a war camp, she still felt utterly dispirited. Riftan's pained expression tormented her, and she was sometimes gripped by the fear that he may have lost all affection for her.

Whenever such thoughts hounded her, Maxi sought solace in sleep. Her body was simply too drained for her to torture herself with self-deprecating thoughts. She watched the hours go by like a goldfish floating in a fishbowl.

Approximately two weeks later, news of victory arrived from Livadon. The coalition army had advanced to the Pamela Plateau and completely annihilated the monster army's main camp. Loud celebrations erupted in Drachium Castle and across the capital.

Chapter 168

Maxi had been idly occupied with embroidery when the deafening cheers outside startled her.

A long trumpet blast announced the victory. The sound seemed to infuse her with new vigor, and she felt like a bear rising from its winter hibernation. The great forces of evil that had plagued her life with pain and adversity from late spring till now had finally raised a white flag.

Maxi cracked open the window. She gazed out over the forest of elm trees, which now wore the colors of autumn, and put on her slippers. A healer entered her room bearing a tray just as she was wrapping a shawl around her shoulders.

The healer looked surprised. "Do you require anything, my lady? I will bring it to you at once if you let me know what it is."

"I-I wish… to go to the main castle. I want to hear news about the campaign party…"

"I will order a maidservant to bring back the news for you. You must not leave your room yet."

"But I feel fine, I'm no longer so drowsy. I'll only… t-talk to the knights. I'm sure they've received detailed reports f-from Livadon."

"But I've just brought you your meal and tonic…"

The healer looked troubled as she set the tray on the table. Maxi had been drinking the bitter tonic every day, morning and night. She wrinkled her nose.

"That tonic… m-makes me feel sluggish. I'll have it when I get back."

The healer looked unsure for a moment but resignedly called for maidservants to accompany her. Maxi made her way down the quiet corridor with two maidservants trailing behind her. Since the princess's palace was located in the most isolated place within Drachium Castle, it was peaceful during the day.

The sun-lit corridor led onto a marble staircase. Afraid that Maxi might tumble down, the maidservants supported her by the elbows as she descended. It made her feel like a ninety-year-old crone, but she kept her complaints to herself. In truth, her legs felt weak from the long bed rest, and even just walking was enough to make her feel dizzy.

Considering my current state, I can't complain about the healers making a fuss.

With a sigh, she descended the last step. It was then that she heard Princess Agnes's voice. Maxi cocked her head.

The princess usually spent her day in the training grounds or at the main castle and only returned to her palace around sunset. It was rare for her to be in her residence at this time.

Worried that something might have happened, Maxi hurried down the corridor. When she peered through a half-open door, she saw Princess Agnes and Simon sitting in the middle of a spacious room lined with bookshelves.

The princess was scrawling something on a piece of parchment. She leaped up from her desk when she spotted Maxi.

"Maximilian. Should you be out of bed?"

"I-I thought a brief walk… would be all right."

Without sparing Maxi a glance, the mage prodded the princess. "Your Highness, your hand has stopped moving."

"Goodness, I'm sick of your nagging. Are all wind magic users taught how to harp on and on as part of their training?" The princess angrily jabbed the quill into the ink bottle and added irritably, "Next time I'm going to ask them to only send me water mages!"

"If you fail to adequately explain the situation to the coming inspectorate, you'll have to wait at least a decade for new mages to be assigned to you."

Simon snorted and motioned for Maxi to come in.

"What are you standing there for? Come in and take a seat."

"I-I'd rather not disturb you… when you are so busy. If you'll excuse—"

"And where are you going?" asked Agnes, looking concerned.

Maxi gave her a bitter smile. "I-I was… thinking of going to see Sir Elliot t-to ask him news of the Remdragon Knights."

"Why go to the trouble when you can just ask me?"

Fiddling with the quill, the princess smiled. "Everyone is well. If you consider the time it takes for the messenger pigeon to reach Drachium, they should have reached Levan or be on board a ship by now."

Hearing the good news, Maxi darted toward the desk. "R-Riftan… sent a message?"

"Yes, it arrived this morning. Would you like to read it? It shouldn't take more than two to three weeks for them to get here."

Princess Agnes rummaged through a pile of parchments and fished out a palm-sized note. Maxi took it from her, her eyes widening as she read.

Number of dead among the Remdragon Knights: nil. The wounded will be treated in Levan before departure.

That was it — just two sentences, and the date of their departure, hastily scrawled on the scrap of parchment.

Maxi's face fell. It said they needed to treat the wounded. Was someone gravely injured?

She was anxiously gnawing her lip when Princess Agnes said cheerfully, "Don't worry. If one of the knights had been gravely injured, he wouldn't have had the presence of mind to send such a message. The other lords put more effort into theirs. They report that they will be staying at the basilica in Levan for three to four days to treat their injured, then immediately board a ship back to Wedon. The main castle is already in a flurry preparing for a grand banquet."

The princess shuddered as though this exasperated her.

"I've been writing hundreds of invitations ever since we received news of the victory. I think His Majesty is planning on using this opportunity to call all the nobles to the capital."

"Th-Then you must be… b-busy preparing for the banquet."

"Actually, planning a response to the Mage Tower's inspectorate is currently more pressing than a frivolous banquet," said Simon.

He tapped on the parchment, urging the princess to keep writing. The parchment was filled with words in the ancient tongue.

The princess groaned and started again. After watching over the princess's progress for a moment like a warden, Simon turned to Maxi.

"Three mages from the Mage Tower died during this campaign," he explained. "Nornui has sent an inspectorate to make sure none of the deaths were caused by unjust commands. It will be difficult for Wedon to hire mages from the Mage Tower in the future if they are not satisfied with our explanation."

"Does the Mage Tower… have such authority?"

"The Mage Tower was established to stop the persecution against mages, and its affiliates are all under its protection. Though the treatment of mages has improved in recent years, the Orthodox Church still holds unfavorable views of magic. That is why Nornui meticulously investigates the death of any of its mages to make sure there are no wrongful deaths."

"Which is why," said the princess bitterly, "those in command, such as myself, are forced to jump through these hoops at every large-scale battle. They expect us to explain to a naive scholar who has never fought in a war and beg them for a new mage."

Maxi eyed the princess's beautifully written ancient script for a moment before asking, "D-Does the Mage Tower… send its mages to w-wherever they are requested?"

"When the Mage Tower receives a request, it is customary for them to review it and send those who volunteer. Though now it will likely take ages to receive a mage from them since every lord in the kingdom is vying to gather as many in their service as possible… The Mage Tower strives to distribute their numbers evenly throughout the kingdom."

"Th-Then… could Anatol also request a m-mage? We are sorely in need of more…"

Both Simon and Princess Agnes froze. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Simon opened his mouth.

"Well… your request will likely be rejected as long as that man remains in Anatol."

"Th-That man?"

"Who else?! He's referring to that brazen renegade!" the princess cried out. "Ruth Serbel, the runaway that abandoned the rules of the Tower! As long as that traitor is in Anatol, the Mage Tower would never consent to sending one of its own."

Maxi had always wondered why a renowned knightly order such as the Remdragon Knights only had one high mage in their service. It had never occurred to her that Ruth was the reason.

As if her anger intensified the longer she talked about Ruth, the princess continued her outburst.

"If not for that nuisance, many high mages would have volunteered to serve under Riftan Calypse. I've advised Riftan to drive that bastard away, but he never listens. He is suffering enormous losses because he stubbornly insists on remaining loyal to that useless scoundrel."

Maxi's face fell. She knew it was not the princess's intention, but her words reminded Maxi that Riftan had rejected a royal betrothal in order to honor a marriage vow he had been forced to make. Her heart grew cold.

Misunderstanding Maxi's expression, the princess collected herself and said, "Don't worry. There are many unaffiliated mages that are quite skilled. When the Remdragon Knights return, I will make a request to the king to seek out accomplished mages for Anatol."

"Th-Thank you, Your Highness."

"No need to thank me. Now then, you should return to your room. It's too soon to be overexerting yourself."

Unable to argue against the princess's insistence, Maxi obediently returned to her bedchamber. She drank the tonic and lay back on her bed. Then, though she was sick and tired of doing so, she forced herself to sleep.

A stream of uneventful days passed once more. In contrast, the main castle bustled with a procession of nobles arriving to attend the capital's victory celebrations. The gardens were packed with servants every morning waiting to greet them. Picnics and welcome feasts were held in the evenings.

Day and night, Maxi strained her neck from her bed to stare out at the castle gates, just in case Riftan miraculously arrived earlier than expected. It must have been a pitiful sight, for Princess Agnes called on her one day and suggested that Maxi attend that evening's banquet.

Maxi stared back at her in surprise. So far, the princess's fussing over Maxi's health had rivaled Riftan's.

As if she were aware of the reason, the princess gave her an embarrassed smile. "I spoke to the healers today, and they told me that your health has improved greatly. If it's not too much of a strain, I think a change of scenery would do some good. After all, you've never attended any of the events this whole time you've been at the capital."

"B-But…" Maxi stammered, hesitant.

Though she had attended the occasional social function at Croyso Castle, it had always been under her father's watchful eye. They all ended the same way, with Maxi retiring to her room early.

Since she had been forbidden from socializing with the other nobles, her knowledge of court etiquette came only from books. She had no conversational or social skills to speak of. Cold sweat broke out on her back as she imagined herself stuttering like a fool among the haughty nobles of the kingdom.

In the end, she went with the same excuse she always used.

"I-I do not like… loud gatherings…"

The princess gave her a resigned look. "I wanted it to be a surprise, but I guess I must come clean. The truth is, the Duke of Croyso arrived at the castle this afternoon along with the other nobles from the north. You'll be able to see him if you attend this evening's banquet."

A chill ran down Maxi's spine. She ducked her head to conceal her expression, her heart pounding as she felt the old terror creep back.

"M-My father is here? Does he… know that I-I'm here?"

"I'm sure His Majesty would have told him. The duke probably hasn't come to see you yet because he has been accompanying my father since he arrived," the princess replied brightly, mistakenly

assuming that Maxi was upset with the Duke of Croyso for not coming to see his own daughter.

Maxi suppressed a sardonic smile. She knew that her presence here meant nothing to her father.

No, it was incorrect to say that he would be completely disinterested. She shrunk into herself when she recalled how he had threatened her if she ever besmirched the Croyso name.

The Duke of Croyso had always disliked introducing Maxi to the other nobles. The man had kept her hidden away out of fear that the world would discover that his own flesh and blood was an inferior being. If she were to embarrass herself in front of Wedon's nobility, her father would certainly make his fury known.

Maxi tried to come up with an excuse to avoid the banquet.

"I-I would love to attend… but I'm afraid I-I am too tired today. I-I think… it would be better to see him alone tomorrow."

"Is the exhaustion still quite bad?"

"I-It is not that serious… but I fear that h-he would worry… if he saw me so sickly…"

The princess nodded, convinced by her stammering excuse. "I understand. Then you should rest. I'll ask the healer to bring you your tonic."

When the princess left the room, Maxi hid under the blanket and curled her shivering body into a tight ball. What excuse could she give to avoid seeing him tomorrow as well?

On second thought, her father might be the one to come up with reasons not to visit her. There were countless nobles in the capital whom he needed to foster connections with. He would have no time to spare on someone like her.

Maxi desperately clung to that hope. She did not wish to see him again. Her last memory of him was still raw in her mind.

His voice as he threatened her of the fate that awaited if she brought shame to the family, his murderous eyes, and the cane threatening to strike at any moment… Maxi shuddered.

She reassured herself by remembering that she had managed to avoid a divorce as her father had wanted, which should have been

sufficient to satisfy him. She then desperately tried to banish all thoughts of the Duke of Croyso from her mind.

Her hopes were dashed the very next day. In the morning, Maxi received word that the Duke of Croyso was waiting for her downstairs in the drawing room. He had come to the princess's residence to see her.

Maxi froze when she heard the news. Princess Agnes wore a disconcerting look that Maxi had never seen on her before. It was clear that the princess had talked to the duke already.

"Your father was… visibly distressed when I told him that you were unwell," said the princess. "He demanded that I let him see you immediately."

Chapter 169

"H-He did?"

Maxi blinked, hardly believing her ears.

Princess Agnes looked equally as uneasy. She irritably swept up the golden locks that had come loose and dangled on her forehead. As she anxiously studied Maxi's face, her scrutiny reminded Maxi of a knight gauging the strength of a weapon.

As if to confirm Maxi's resolve, the princess squeezed her hands and said, "The knights managed to calm him down, but… he is not in good humor. Do you think you'll be all right?"

Maxi's expression grew troubled. Just what had her father done for the princess to have such a reaction? She knew that he was not the kind of man who would ever lose his composure in front of the nobles. After all, he had perfectly played the part of a benevolent and indulgent father.

Though he flogged her in front of the servants, he would press his cold lips to her cheek like a doting parent in public. That was the kind of man he was. She wondered what had gotten him so agitated.

Full of fear, Maxi cleared her throat. "May I ask w-what made him… so angry?"

"Well, clearly he was upset because of what you've been through, and…"

Agnes swallowed dryly and looked down as if she did not know how to continue. Maxi almost laughed at the absurdity of the notion. Her father would not have batted an eye had he been told that she had died.

It was possible that he was not angry but simply keeping up the charade. No doubt he was obliged to call on her to maintain his image.

Her tension easing a little, Maxi got out of bed. She should be able to bear ten minutes. After all, had she not endured him for twenty-two years?

She steeled herself. Since the Duke of Croyso cared greatly for appearances, she did not think he would strike her while she was under the princess's protection. She was a Calypse now, not a Croyso, she reminded herself. Her father could no longer treat her as he pleased.

"I will get dressed… a-and be down in a minute."

Princess Agnes lingered as though she wished to say something else, but she pressed her lips together and left the room. Though the princess's behavior was perplexing, knowing that the Duke of Croyso was waiting downstairs sent Maxi into a rush of preparations in order to appear presentable.

Light spilled from the drawing room door into the corridor. Maxi's stomach twisted into a knot as she approached. Standing just a few steps away, she hesitated for a moment before squeezing her eyes shut and entering the lavish room.

"My lady."

Standing by the door, Sir Elliot respectfully offered her his hand. Maxi awkwardly took it and strode across the room. Ursuline Ricaydo was also present, and he had a hostile gaze aimed at her father.

The Duke of Croyso stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

Maxi's heart turned to ice. One glance at his cold eyes was all it took for her to know that he was furious.

"What a long time it's been, daughter."

Her father's voice was ominously gentle. When Maxi merely stood frozen, his lips curled into a smile.

"Will you not greet your father?"

Hearing the veiled threat, Maxi hastily opened her mouth. "A-A long time… indeed, Father. I-I am glad to see—"

"I've heard everything," he said, cutting her off. "How extremely difficult it must have been for you."

Lowering himself into a chair with thick silk upholstery, the Duke of Croyso fiddled with a button on his garment. His tone was cryptic when he spoke.

"Everyone in the capital is talking about you. I felt terrible when I heard the news."

"Your Grace!"

It was Elliot, who had been quietly standing behind Maxi. Anger rose on the duke's face at the knight's impertinence.

"Can you not see that I am talking to my daughter? It is not a conversation you dare intrude on."

"We have orders from Sir Riftan to protect her ladyship."

"Are you implying that I am a danger to my own daughter?"

"But her ladyship doesn't—"

Elliot abruptly stopped himself and darted a glance at Maxi. Unable to grasp what they were talking about, Maxi looked from one person to the other in confusion.

The Duke of Croyso let out a sigh. "I've already told you of my intentions, have I not? My daughter deserves to know the truth. I hope you are not suggesting that you are more concerned for her welfare than I am."

The color drained from Maxi's face. How could this man utter such barefaced lies with a straight face?

Ignoring her stunned gaze, the duke haughtily raised his chin and said, "I would like for you to leave us now. I wish to speak with my daughter alone."

The two knights exchanged glances before turning to Maxi. She reluctantly nodded.

"P-Please give us a moment. I will be… j-just fine."

"Then, we will be in the room right across the hall. Please call us if you need anything."

The knights turned around and left the room. When she heard the door close behind her, Maxi anxiously clutched her dress. Her father's gaze was like a knife hacking into her. The venom in his eyes made all her muscles tense.

However, instead of immediately throwing threats at her as she had expected, the duke remained quiet. It was an ominous silence. Unable to bear the torturous stillness any longer, Maxi spoke first.

"M-May I ask… why you came—"

"Prepare to leave for Croyso Castle immediately."

Maxi froze at the unexpected words.

The duke fixed his gaze on the window as though he could no longer bear to look at her and continued grimly, "I am in the process of securing Rosetta's marriage to the royal family. I cannot allow you to remain here. Be prepared to leave today."

"B-B-But…"

Maxi was so flustered that she was at a loss for words. A look of sheer contempt suddenly flashed across her father's face.

"What on earth made you think you could crawl into the capital in the first place? You should have remained quietly in that hinterland… How dare you come here and shame me?" the duke snarled, his voice growing more and more vicious.

Trembling, Maxi clasped her hands. Her father no longer had the right to order her around. The only person who had authority over her actions now was her husband, therefore she had no reason to shake in fear. Repeatedly reminding herself of this fact, Maxi spoke as calmly as possible.

"I have… n-no intentions of impeding the marriage talks. My husband… will be here to t-take me home in a few days. I will quietly remain in the princess's residence… until then."

"Are you disobeying my command?" the duke asked, his voice growing lower ever so slightly.

Against her will, Maxi's reply turned into a plea. "I c-cannot leave… w-when Riftan will be here any day now. Wasn't it your wish… th-that I… preserve this marriage?"

"That is exactly why I'm taking you away from here!"

The duke shot to his feet and strode over to her. Maxi went to clutch the door handle, but her father was faster.

He yanked her back and hissed in her ear, "What man would keep a woman who can't bear him any heirs? Did you think that he would take you back to his estate when he returns to the capital? You wretched fool! Will you not be satisfied until you've shamed our family in front of all the nobility?"

"I-I don't understand…"

"Practically everyone in Drachium Castle is gossiping about your miscarriage. What kind of fool must you be not to know that you've

lost a child?!”

The words refused to sink in. All Maxi could do was look up at her father with a blank expression. A miscarriage? What on earth did he mean? Her hearing became muffled, and her face turned white.

As if his anger grew hotter by the minute, the duke violently shook the half-dazed Maxi.

“King Reuben raised concerns about Rosetta’s ability to conceive by mentioning you. He blatantly mocked me by saying that it worried him that Rosetta might not be fertile just like her sister! Tell me, how does it feel now that you’ve managed to damage your sister’s prospects as well? How do you intend to take responsibility if this marriage talk falls apart?!”

“I-I… I’ve… n-never had a… m-miscarriage! There must be a… m-misunderstanding…”

His face contorting with rage, the duke raised his hand. Maxi squeezed her eyes shut, but the blow never came. When she slowly opened her eyes, she saw her father breathing heavily in an effort to restrain himself.

Turning away from her, he picked up the ivory cane propped against the chair. He straightened himself as though tired of arguing with her.

“There is no need for more words. You are to leave this place before that low-born arrives. We must avoid a divorce until Rosetta’s marriage is finalized. I will not condone both a divorce and a broken engagement… I will not allow you to dishonor the Croyso name and turn me into a laughingstock!”

“I… c-cannot leave. I will talk to Riftan… o-once he arrives! H-He has told me th-that he has no intention of d-divorcing me. I-It’s true!”

Maxi clung to her father’s cloak. Despite his face twisting viciously in response, she could not stop herself. It felt like the ground was shaking, and she found it difficult to steady herself. Her head was a jumble of thoughts.

“I-I am certain… th-that my miscarriage is a misunderstanding as well. No one… h-has told me of it. I am m-merely unwell… because of magic—”

"Must I have you dragged home?" said the duke, cruelly slapping her hand away.

Maxi gazed up at him in utter disbelief. Then her eyes began to burn, and she shook with violent sobs. Spinning on her heels, she opened the door with trembling hands and fled.

Having heard the raised voices, Ursuline, Elliot, and Princess Agnes rushed out of the door at the opposite end. Running over to them, Maxi pleaded like a supplicant begging for an answer.

"D-Did I really lose a child? T-Tell me it isn't true. M-My father is mistaken, i-isn't he?"

"Maximilian…" said Princess Agnes, her face crumpling in anguish.

Seeing the answer on the princess's face, Maxi lost the strength in her legs. She staggered, and Elliot caught her just before she collapsed. Maxi scrubbed at her face and vacantly stared at the floor. One by one, flashes of once-baffling words and behaviors came rushing back to her addled mind.

The fact that she had been unconscious for a week. The pitiful gazes. The way everyone had been treating her so delicately. Riftan's pained expression…

Some invisible force had her in a stranglehold. Maxi struggled for breath.

"W-Why… Why didn't you tell me? Why?"

"The commander ordered that we never speak of it," Ursuline replied stonily.

"You were in a critical condition, my lady. Not only were you drained of mana, but you were bleeding profusely. You could have died. We didn't think you would be able to bear the shock of losing a child…"

"The… The shock of… losing a child…" Maxi muttered in a stupor, placing her hand on her abdomen.

Their child had been right here one moment, then gone the next. She did not know how to accept that fact.

Being informed of a miscarried child she had not even been aware of did not immediately fill her with anguish. It felt more like a part of her became paralyzed. A vague sense of loss settled within her.

Unable to cope with this sudden truth, Maxi stood stupefied.

Princess Agnes patted her on the shoulder. "I know it pains you, Maximilian… but there will be other children. The fact that you are safe and well is what matters most."

Maxi looked blearily up at the princess, whose beautiful blue eyes were filled with pity. Suddenly, her heart clenched painfully. She knew very well how difficult her mother's labor had been, and how she had suffered countless miscarriages before she finally bore Maxi. Whenever her father spoke, it always involved some sort of jab at her mother's incompetence.

Maxi had seen firsthand the fate that awaited a woman who could not produce an heir. Rosetta's mother had grown weaker by the day until, unable to leave her bed, she had passed away. Her heart shrunk with fear.

No, Riftan was different. He would never subject her to such cruelty.

He might not be as cruel, but…

Maxi bit her lip. Her chest panged with anxiety as she recalled his grim expression. Riftan might just be holding himself back from blaming her despite feeling resentful. After all, he had implored her to stay out of danger. Considering how stubbornly she had gone against his wishes, she would have nothing to say if he blamed her for killing their child through her recklessness.

Overwhelmed with despair, Maxi buried her face in her hands. Uncontrollable tremors racked her whole body at the thought that Riftan might not want her anymore.

Elliot desperately tried to console her. "Please, my lady. It's all in the past now. You mustn't be distress—"

"I-It's not i-in the past for me!" Maxi screamed, pushing his hand away.

Elliot looked down at her with a pained expression, and Maxi suddenly felt sick. She backed away.

At that moment, the Duke of Croyso gripped her arm from behind. Maxi stifled a whimper as the gold ring on his bony finger dug into her flesh.

Wrapping an arm around Maxi's shoulders, the duke turned to the knights and intoned, "I will be taking my daughter to Croyso Castle.

Recuperating at her childhood home will be better for her."

The knights cried out their objections.

"Sir Riftan will be here soon! Without his permission, we cannot—"

"I will not have my daughter become gossip fodder for those frivolous nobles. You are being extremely inconsiderate."

The duke let out a sigh and turned his attention to the princess.

"Is there anyone in Wedon ignorant of the marriage talks that happened between you and my son-in-law, Your Highness? How do you think your loyal servants view my daughter?"

Princess Agnes's face flushed at his rebuke. "There is nothing between me and Riftan!"

"And do your servants think the same?"

Her face pale now, the princess glowered at the duke before glancing off to the side. The servants standing in the corridor ducked their heads in unison.

The duke clicked his tongue. "It will only be a matter of time for malicious rumors to spread throughout the castle. I cannot allow my daughter to remain here any longer. I will take her back to Croyso Castle, so you may tell Calypse that he can come for her if he so wishes."

Unable to object, Princess Agnes pursed her lips.

Ursuline had been glaring at the duke throughout the altercation. He now turned his gaze to Maxi.

"My lady… do you wish to return to Croyso Castle?"

"I-I…"

Maxi shrank into herself. She had been standing in a daze, barely listening to the exchange as though it had nothing to do with her. The duke's hand on her shoulder tightened, threatening her into submission. Though his vicious grip filled her with terror, she was even more afraid to face Riftan.

"Yes…" she mumbled, her voice empty.

Her eyes burned with hot tears. She bit her quivering lip and barely managed to suppress the sobs that threatened to spill out.

"I want… t-to return to Croyso Castle."

◆◆◆

Dead leaves fluttered on the wind like moths. Through the carriage window, Maxi vacantly stared out at Croyso Castle as it loomed nearer.

A cold, northeastern gust buffeted the hill, doing justice to Etherias's reputation as 'the season of wind.' Migrating birds formed a surging black river against the blue sky, while ripe wheat fields rustled like a sea of gold.

The magnificent prison Maxi had been confined in for so long rose from the chilly autumnal scenery, flaunting its opulent beauty.

Chapter 170

Maxi remembered the day she had left this place. It had felt like a lifetime ago that Riftan had whisked her away in that bewildering carriage ride. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine that she would voluntarily return.

A strange feeling of despair came over her, and she leaned her head against the coach wall. Her father, who had been sitting in silence across from her, scowled and rapped his cane on the floor. Maxi flinched and sat upright.

Traveling in a carriage with her father was like torture. Her nerves were tightly wound the whole trip, and her mouth was clamped shut like a clam as she tried her best not to provoke him. It was fortunate that Sir Elliot was traveling with them. The knights had been adamant that they could not ignore Riftan's command and that at least one of them must accompany her. It was decided that Elliot Charon would be her escort to Croyso Castle.

With the knight riding alongside the carriage, the duke had not been able to vent his anger. He could only clutch his cane and lash her with contemptuous looks.

"You must stay as silent as a mouse," the duke said, repeating the same warning he had given her countless times throughout their journey. "Rosetta will be married next spring. You are to remain quietly in the castle until then. I will use your convalescence as an excuse to refuse visitors. Though I've told Calypse that he may come for you, I have no intention of letting him see you. He will no doubt come to seek a divorce. We must avoid the issue until next spring."

He glared at her with his pale gray eyes.

"The church deems miscarriage as acceptable grounds for divorce. It goes without saying that King Reuben will be overjoyed at the news. I will not have a wench like you ruin a decade's worth of planning."

Maxi hung her head in shame. Her father's ambition was for a successor of outstanding pedigree through Rosetta. It had long become an obsession akin to the sticky stew remnants at the bottom of a pot.

The duke irritably continued expounding on his plans.

"Rosetta must bear at least two sons. A healthy male to inherit the throne and another perfect son whom I shall adopt as my heir. Unlike you, I will make sure that Rosetta is regarded as the embodiment of perfection and health."

Knowing that he was not expecting a response, Maxi merely clasped her hands and desperately prayed for an ogre to leap out and topple their carriage. As always, however, her hopes went unanswered.

The carriage safely entered the lavish gardens of Croyso Castle. As hundreds of servants scurried down for their master's earlier than expected arrival, Maxi stood in front of the carriage with her skirt bunched in her fists.

Elliot dismounted and walked over. "Are you all right, my lady? You don't look well."

The duke answered before Maxi could reply.

"She is tired from the long journey. I am sure that she will be able to recuperate more quickly now that she's home."

The duke coiled an arm around her shoulders and forced her to turn around. He then glanced over his shoulder at Elliot and said, "Are you satisfied now that my daughter has arrived safely home? You have accomplished your task, so I must request that you leave by tomorrow. You are welcome to stay the night."

Elliot's expression turned grim at the duke's blatant dismissal. Maxi helplessly looked back at the knight until her father forced her up the staircase.

As soon as they entered the great hall, the duke flung her away from him. He strode across the palatial hall — large enough for an ogre ball — and shouted at the head steward to take Maxi to her room at once.

Maxi hung her head to evade the looks of the surprised servants. The head steward was a man who had served the duke all his life.

He obeyed without asking questions, motioning his head for Maxi to follow him.

"This way, my lady."

Maxi was trailing him like a ghost when a sparkle above them caught her eye, and she froze in her tracks.

It was Rosetta. Bathed in sunlight, her half-sister gazed down from the second-floor railing. Maxi inhaled a sharp breath. It had only been a little over a year, but Rosetta had grown even more beautiful. Her light brown hair glistened like silver in the light, while her perfect proportions now exuded an alluring charm.

Maxi bit her lip. Her younger sister's perfection tore at her heart more than ever before. A feeling of misery expanded within her as she hurried after the steward. They soon reached a quiet room at the end of the annex.

"Please rest now, my lady. I will call Joana for you."

Finally alone, Maxi glanced around her former chambers. The room lay in the main castle's shadow throughout the day, ensuring it remained in perpetual darkness. A layer of white dust covered everything.

She walked over to the window and gazed down at the garden until she felt listless, then slumped down on the bed. Not long after, her nursemaid entered the room.

"My lady…"

Joana was a voluptuous woman in her fifties. Maxi noted that the nursemaid had many more white hairs than she remembered. After a long stretch of silence, Joana walked over to Maxi and clasped her with her plump hands.

"Oh, my poor lady. Lady Arian passed away after countless miscarriages… and now you've met with the same fate. How cruel must God be?"

Her lament caused a twang across Maxi's deadened nerves. Her face contorting, Maxi pushed her hands away. Her nursemaid's sorrowful gaze was more difficult to bear than the impassive faces of the other servants.

"I-I…" Maxi turned away, her palms pressed against her burning eyes. "I… am tired. I wish to rest."

"I understand. I will bring you a bath and some food."

Dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, Joana left the room. Maxi grabbed the jar on the bedside table and heaved the porridge she had forced down her throat that morning.

As she gagged and hurled up rancid bile, the emotions she had bottled somewhere deep came rushing out like a tidal wave. Remorse and shame raged in the pit of her stomach, and grief weighed on her heart. Guilt hacked at her like an ax as she recalled how recklessly she had taxed her body. Lowering the jar to the floor, Maxi trembled uncontrollably.

Riftan was like any feudal lord. He would undoubtedly want an heir who would one day inherit his castle, land, and fortune. There was no guarantee that she would ever conceive again. In fact, it was possible that the miscarriage had not been caused by overexertion, but rather by her inherent inability to carry a child.

Maxi hugged her shaking shoulders as she remembered the Croyso women who had wasted away until their deaths. Would she be able to bear it if Riftan were to grow more and more distant toward her?

Her throat throbbed painfully, and she stroked it with trembling hands as she imagined how Riftan would treat her. It filled her with fear and despair. She was much too ashamed to face him now.

Raising her head, she looked at herself in the mirror propped against the wall. Her spine seemed to freeze at the sight of her own pale, gaunt face. It was her mother's face, vaguely imprinted in her memory and now resurrected in a reflection. Forlorn eyes gazed back at the daughter who would suffer the same fate. Maxi squeezed her eyes shut and laid her reeling head against the pillow.

She did not want to think about anything. It might be better for her to live confined in this tiny world, feigning numbness against the hardship as she had always done. At least then she would not have to worry about losing another's affections, nor would she have to bend over backward to become something she was not.

Maxi buried her face in the sheets. Instead of watching the happiness she had only just managed to grasp dissolve before her

eyes, it would be easier to pretend that it had never existed in the first place.

Having nothing meant that she would be free from the pain of loss.

◆◆◆

Life seemed to snap back to how it had been before Riftan. The feeling of powerlessness, deeply embedded in her bones, swallowed her up the first chance it got.

Her ego shrunk back to its original size within the confines of her gloomy chambers. Having no one to talk to except for her nursemaid, her impediment grew worse.

Though Maxi was aware that everything she had worked so hard to build was crumbling down, she no longer had the strength to pick up the pieces. She could not stop the dread, terror, despair, and resignation from boiling over.

Maxi sat by the window and watched the bare branches sway in the wind. It felt as if she had returned to that day a year ago, trembling at the thought of divorce.

No, this fear was more intense.

Even in their last moment together, Riftan had not held her, nor looked her in the eyes to offer words of solace. He had not given her the chance to explain herself.

Please, just go.

Those had been his parting words. He could just as well have meant he wanted her out of his sight.

Maxi glanced up at the cold sky before turning back to her chambers. Her gaze lingered on the bed where both her mother and stepmother had once laid. In the next moment, she found herself crawling into it and curling up like a kidney bean.

A part of her had known all along that this would happen. Perhaps that was why she had been unable to bear being away from him. The fear that her miraculous happiness would disappear like a mirage had gripped her whenever they were apart. All the efforts

she had made to not lose him had circled back to stab her, cause Riftan's disillusionment, and take her child. Now she was back to where she had started.

Maxi vacantly stared at the ceiling before closing her eyes. Around lunchtime, Joana entered the room bearing a tray with the usual bowl of porridge. No matter how many times Maxi heaved up the food, her nursemaid did her best to ensure she ate.

Thinking of Joana's efforts, Maxi forced herself to down the porridge. A wave of nausea came on when she was halfway through, and she ended up hurling everything back up.

Joana gazed down at Maxi with forlorn eyes.

"Lady Arian was also too delicate for her own good," she said, shaking her head. "She could not even keep water down whenever something bad happened. And to think you have taken after her…"

"I-I'm sorry… I'll eat the rest later…"

Joana heaved a sigh as she set the bowl down. "You should rest while I bring you a new blanket."

When her nursemaid left the room with the soiled sheets, Maxi staggered out of bed to wash her face and get changed. She slumped back down when a knock came at the door. Had Joana returned already?

Maxi looked up to see Rosetta, resplendent in a purple dress, glide into the room. Maxi stared at her sister in surprise. Forgoing initial niceties, Rosetta pulled a chair next to the bed and sat down.

"You look terrible."

Maxi propped herself into a sitting position, her face anxious. "What b-brings you here?"

"That senseless woman kept raving on about how you were dying, so I came to see if it was true."

Rosetta's peculiar eyes, which were somewhere between green and blue, coldly swept over Maxi.

"I guess she wasn't exaggerating."

"I-If that is all… I would like you to leave now."

Ignoring her request, Rosetta said abruptly, "Do you want to die?"

Dumbfounded, Maxi stared back at her. Her half-sister's eyes were somber, incongruous with her vivid beauty.

"You won't be able to last a year in this castle in that condition. And I'm sure news of your death would mean nothing to our father."

"W-What happens to me… is none of your concern."

Rosetta's face hardened at Maxi's blunt response. "You are so pathetic that I simply can't stand it. Destroying yourself in self-pity. I've had it with your stupidity."

"I-I have no reason… to put up with your insults."

"Then you shouldn't have returned in such a pathetic state!" Rosetta shot back. "Just looking at you infuriates me. You return battered after foolishly following your husband to war and miscarrying your child, and now you're trying to starve yourself to death. Do you really think your husband would care? Ha! He might even be elated at being able to avoid a troublesome divorce. He'll likely marry the princess before you're even in the ground. That's how men are!"

Maxi winced as though Rosetta's cruel words had stabbed her. Fighting back tears, Maxi glared at her sister.

"Do not… s-slander him when you don't even know him. My husband… is kind to me. H-He truly cherished me. That's why I—"

"So, you gave him your heart just because he bothered to be nice to you," Rosetta said sardonically.

Maxi was about to snap back when Rosetta's lips suddenly curled into a bitter smile.

"Wake up. You fell for that man because he was nice to you, but kindness is not love. A man's affection is no different from a coin. It can flip at any moment when circumstances change. Have you not learned anything from our father? Men can be generous to women as long as they continue to please them and give them what they want. Like how Father is with me. But you should know better than anyone how cruel a man can be when a woman fails to give him what he desires."

"R-Riftan… i-is different from our father… He is—"

"If he is so different, why are you here?"

Unable to think of a response, Maxi opened and closed her mouth in vain. Rosetta sneered at her.

"Don't speak what you don't believe. Deep down, you know your husband is the same. That's why you came back. You might deny it, but you are as cynical as I am, if not more."

"I-I… I'd like you to leave now. I-I no longer want… to continue this conversation," Maxi muttered weakly, covering her bloodshot eyes.

Rosetta remained silently seated for a long while before rising to her feet.

"I truly wished for you to never return to this castle."

Maxi looked up at her sister, her eyes full of hurt.

Rosetta whirled around and said as she walked toward the door, "You always disappoint me. Always…"

Chapter 171

The conversation with her half-sister pushed Maxi's already-addled mind into turmoil, and she began to question her feelings. In retrospect, everything was subject to doubt.

Why had she been so obsessed with Riftan? What had made her so irrational? In a little over a year, he had shaken her life to the core, made her want to live, and then sucked all the vitality from her. He had become her reason to live. But was that normal? It was possible that she had blindly followed him like a newborn duckling would its mother.

The moment uncertainty gripped her, even the things she had thought clear became muddled, and she found it impossible to unravel the tangled strings of her heart.

Having returned to where she had started, she looked back at everything — her memories in Anatol, the campaign, her ordeals in the war — and questioned whether they were real or a distortion of the mind. The doubt that had taken root in the pit of her stomach grew by the day until it threatened to come bursting out of her throat.

"My lady, why don't you take a short stroll? There is no wind today, and it's sunny in the garden."

Maxi raised her head. She had been immersed in her thoughts when her nursemaid made the suggestion.

Joana drew the thick curtain, letting in harsh silver sunlight. It was that single hour of the morning when her room received sun. After briefly gazing out at the dazzling autumn day, Maxi listlessly turned away from the window.

"I… d-don't feel like going out."

"Do you know how pallid you look, my lady? You'll end up like a corpse if you don't get some sun. Please, enjoy some fresh air on

days like this. Waste away any longer and your husband won't take you with him when he comes."

Her nursemaid's last point finally roused Maxi out of bed. Even though she was uncertain of her feelings, Riftan was still the motivation behind all of her actions.

Maxi had lost weight over the past few weeks, and she draped a robe over her now too-big dress. Joana helped her out of her chambers.

The annex was deathly silent. The vast, opulent building was devoid of people except for a handful of maidservants and guards the duke had posted to keep an eye on Maxi, but even they were hard to come by unless she deliberately sought them out.

The servants called this place the house of exile. For years, the duke had confined the Croyso women he deemed incompetent to this residence to keep them out of his sight. Maxi descended the chilly stairway and stepped out into the courtyard clogged with fallen leaves. The red ivy twined along the walls glistened white in the sun, and the evergreen bushes rustled in the breeze.

Walking along the flowerbed, Maxi vacantly gazed down at the dried-up vegetation. A few birds hopped through it, hopefully pecking at imaginary seeds. Her idle observation was interrupted when she noticed soldiers bustling about the path leading up to the main castle.

It was a baffling sight. Not even a single ant approached the annex around this time. Maxi was wondering if something had happened when one of the guards spotted her and strode over.

"You cannot be outside, my lady. The duke commanded that you were to remain in the annex."

Maxi's face flushed at the guard's prison warden-like attitude. Though they had made it clear that she was prohibited from entering the main castle, had they not allowed her to take strolls in the garden or visit the library until now?

She was rooted to the spot, flustered, when the guard said authoritatively, "Why aren't you returning to your chambers?"

Joana had been uneasily standing at the back until then. At the guard's tone, she swiftly grabbed Maxi's elbow. "I will escort her

ladyship back to her chambers."

Like a helpless chick in her nursemaid's arms, Maxi numbly returned to her room. Joana was beside herself, mumbling that she should never have made such a suggestion.

"How strange. His Grace was never against you taking walks in the garden before…"

Closing the door to Maxi's chambers, Joana studied her charge's face.

"In any case, at least he has been sending healers to you regularly. I'm sure he is not completely devoid of affection for you. You mustn't let this upset you too much."

Maxi could not even bring herself to scoff at the absurd attempt at consolation. The only reason her father sent healers was that his plans would go awry if she were to die before Rosetta's wedding. Rosetta's mother had passed in her sickbed before she could bear a son. If Maxi were to meet the same fate, Rosetta's marriage to the royal family would fall apart no matter the size of her dowry.

Instead of explaining all this to her nursemaid, Maxi gave a half-hearted nod and removed her robe. She handed it to Joana, who folded it and draped it over her forearm. Something fell out of the robe and landed on the floor with a clink as she did so.

"Oh dear, what's this?"

Joana picked up the object. Unconcerned, Maxi turned slowly to see what it was. Her eyes grew wide as soon as they locked on the blackened, dented coin. She had kept it in a secret pocket she had sewn inside the robe to ensure she would never lose it again.

Maxi hastily held out her hand. "G-Give it to me."

For a moment, Joana blinked and glanced back and forth between the nail-sized coin and Maxi's face. She then clicked her tongue in bemusement and handed it back to Maxi.

"You did have a habit of collecting pebbles or weeds ever since you were a child. You used to say you would make a crown. But you are a grown woman now, much too old to be collecting junk like this."

"Th-This is not… j-junk."

"Of course you would say that."

Shaking her head, Joana left the room. Maxi stared down at the coin. This was irrefutable proof that everything she had felt and experienced after Riftan came into her life was real. Brushing her fingers over the rough surface, she silently mouthed, *I pray that nothing bad will happen to you… and that only good things will come to you.*

Her heart wrenched as she repeated Riftan's words from when he had given her the coin. Her face crumpled as she pressed it to her lips, and her shoulders shook with the fresh realization of her weakness.

Rosetta had been right. She trusted no one, not even herself. The only thing she was certain of was her ill-fated future.

"M-My lady!"

Maxi hastily wiped at her tears when she heard Joana's call. The nursemaid came rushing into the room and pointed out the window.

"We have a problem!" Joana cried. "I tried to find out why the guard treated you that way — it's because the Remdragon Knights are here!"

Maxi stared back at Joana, the words not sinking in right away. Clearly terrified of something, her nursemaid drew the curtains and dragged Maxi over to sit on the bed.

"It seems your husband had sent a request to the duke asking to see you. I'm told that our knights had a difficult time driving him away."

"Th-They drove him away?" Maxi parroted back. "You mean… R-Riftan came to see me… but Father… s-sent him away?"

"Of course. What choice did he have when your husband might have been here to demand a divorce?"

Joana ran her eyes over Maxi's ashen face and heaved a sigh.

"What man would be happy to see his wife in such a condition? His Grace probably had no choice but to turn him away."

Maxi anxiously glanced around. Had Riftan truly come to seek a divorce? Her nursemaid seemed to believe so. Perhaps everyone at Croyso Castle did so too.

Joana flicked a glance at the door as though Riftan might come bursting in at any moment, then squeezed Maxi's hands.

“Thankfully, it will be Paxias soon. When the weather grows colder, even your husband will be forced to return to his estate in the country, and he won’t be able to leave until the following year. Just hold out till then. Your sister will be married, and your father might be more lenient with you.”

Joana patted Maxi on the arm as though she were reassuring a child, then left the room once more. Unclenching her fist, Maxi stared at the coin that now glistened with cold sweat.

Knowing that Riftan was here made her heart flutter. Maxi bit her lip. Had she not followed her father here because she had been too scared to face Riftan?

Even so, she was overcome with the desire to see him. Shoving the coin into her pocket, Maxi peeked through the drawn curtains. She might be able to see him at a distance if she went somewhere higher. After a moment of hesitation, she clenched her jaw and pulled on her robe once more. She wanted to confirm with her own eyes that Riftan had returned unharmed.

Maxi surveyed the corridor for a long time through a gap in the door. When she was certain that no one was around, she quietly slipped out of her room. No one must have suspected that she would sneak out, as the back door the servants used to visit the latrine was unguarded. Maxi quickened her pace.

She stepped outside into a forest of auburn hazel trees. Concealing herself behind the trunks, Maxi circled the annex toward the main castle.

The long period of bed rest had left her weak, and the brief sprint through the forest was enough to send her head reeling and legs shaking. After catching her breath behind the bushes, she sneaked into the castle.

As luck would have it, no one spotted her. Maxi’s eyes darted around as she leaped up the steps of the narrow staircase two at a time. She felt faint by the time she reached the fifth floor. Panting like a dog in the scorching sun, Maxi barely managed to make it up one more flight.

The sixth-floor landing opened onto a wide, arched terrace overlooking the entire estate. Maxi teetered over to the battlement

and saw the House of Croyso banner flying atop the roof of the castle's tower. Beyond the thick castle walls, the Remdragon Knights were camped in front of the gates.

Even though they were too far away for Maxi to make out their faces, she spotted Riftan right away. He sat on his horse, Talon.

As she watched the wind tousle his black hair, she thought her heart might burst from her chest. All of the complicated emotions raging inside her instantly melded into one — the desire to see him up close. Even if he no longer wanted her, she thought she could endure it if she could just have his arms around her one last time.

The irresistible urge took over, and Maxi spun on her heels. She was about to race down the stairs when someone grabbed her arm.

Maxi shrieked. One of her father's personal, knighted guards looked down at her with a frightening expression.

"The duke wishes you to remain in your chambers. Did no one convey that to you?"

"P-Please unhand me."

Ignoring her request, the knight briskly led her down the stairs.

"His Grace was furious when he found out that you were not in your room," he said irritably as he dragged her along. Maxi gasped in terror when the knight turned down the corridor on the fourth floor. Her whole body shook with fear.

"I-I… only w-wanted to see him from afar! I-I will return to my ch-chambers now! Please… t-turn a blind eye just this once."

"The duke commanded that you be brought here. I am bound to obey his orders," the knight said apathetically as he kept up his brisk pace.

Maxi struggled to free her arm from his grasp, but it was simply impossible to fight back against the strength of a seasoned knight. Before she knew it, he was dragging her into the room at the end of the corridor.

Terrified, Maxi whirled left and right. Her stomach turned as she took in the mirror, the chair, and the array of riding crops on the wall. She clung to the knight's arm, stopping him from leaving.

"I promise… to never leave the annex again! I-I swear! P-Please let me out."

The knight sighed and gently pried her hands off.

"You should not have disobeyed your father's orders from the start. Why would you do such a thing knowing full well how strict His Grace is?"

The knight turned around apathetically and left the room. When she heard the lock turn, overwhelming fear sent her into a frantic attempt to open it. No matter how hard she rattled the door, it refused to budge. Her legs began to tremble.

With a look of sheer terror, Maxi sagged to the floor. Her reflection in the mirror seemed to jeer at her, asking if she really had not suspected that this would happen. What had driven her to willingly return to this hell? Was being discarded by Riftan such a terrifying fate? Had she truly believed that he was worse than her father?

Maxi hugged her knees. Even if that were the case, she should have run away to somewhere else entirely instead of coming back. How was she any different from livestock that meekly followed the rope to the slaughterhouse? Filled with self-hatred, violent sobs shook her whole body.

She had no idea how long she spent crying, but the sky began to take on a tinge of pale purple when the duke entered the room. Maxi recoiled and rose to her feet. Her father strode to the middle of the room and haughtily raised his chin.

"I've been too lenient with you," he said in a voice that sent a chill down her spine. "I only requested one thing — that you remain as inconspicuous as a ghost. Was that such a difficult task?"

"I-I was… just trying to s-see him from afar. I wasn't trying to defy __"

"When did I give you permission to speak?"

The duke struck the floor with his cane, and Maxi promptly closed her mouth.

Glaring at her, the duke muttered menacingly, "That low-born has undone twenty years of efforts in educating you."

Clutching his cane with both hands, the duke gritted his teeth.

"I suppose it is to be expected. The company of an ignorant commoner who knows nothing of the social order is bound to be a corrupt influence."

Maxi had been staring at the floor up until then, her face ashen. She jerked her head up in anger at her father's words. How could he speak so badly of Riftan?

"Riftan… f-fought in a dangerous campaign in your stead, a-and suffered all the hardships that entailed. You of all people… shouldn't s-speak of him so—"

The cane struck her before she could finish. Maxi saw stars as she collapsed onto the floor. The sharp blow was so painful that she could not even scream. Her head pulsed as though her skull were cracked open, and her temples burned as if on fire.

The room was spinning. Clutching her head, Maxi peered up at the duke in terror.

The duke's chest heaved as he spat, "You dare speak to me in such a manner?"

As if the first blow had not been enough to appease him, the duke swung his cane again and struck her shoulder. The bone-splicing pain made Maxi twist away, struggling for breath. In just two blows, the Duke of Croyso had managed to crush all her defiance.

Her whole body shook as she tried to steady herself with both palms on the floor. The duke grabbed her by the hair and yanked her head up.

"State your complaints clearly. Stop stammering like a fool. Speak so I can understand!"

Maxi's lips trembled. Clutching her chin, he savagely urged her on.

"Come now, speak. You have my permission to say whatever you want. What I would give for you to complete a single sentence without stuttering like an imbecile!"

"P-P-Please—"

Maxi desperately tried to loosen her rigid tongue through her chattering teeth. She unwittingly bit it in the process, and blood trickled down her mouth. Pure contempt flashed in her father's eyes as he glared down at her. He shoved her away and strode over to the wall to select a riding crop.

Maxi watched helplessly as he took one down. Although there was nothing restraining her, Maxi found that she could not move.

"Turn around and undress," the duke commanded coldly.

Maxi did not respond.

"The lashing you'll receive will only worsen the longer you delay."

Maxi took off her robe with trembling hands and pulled her bodice down. The duke took his place behind her, facing her bare back. Maxi bit down on the front of her dress that she clutched over her chest.

The cruel lashing soon began. The leather crop sliced into her skin like a knife. Every blow made her feel like a wretched beast, and every time the pain of a hacking ax landed on her back, she wanted to abandon all her pride and beg for forgiveness.

Although she tried to endure it on her knees, she soon curled into a ball on the cold stone floor and instinctively tried to crawl away. Her father's furious bellows reverberated around her, but Maxi could not comprehend any of it. Cowering with her arms over her head, she burst into sobs.

The lashings abruptly stopped. It did not occur to Maxi to look up as she whimpered in pain while struggling to breathe.

An icy voice pierced the room.

"What in the devil are you doing?"

Maxi's neck stiffened before she slowly looked up. Riftan had one hand clamped around the duke's wrist, his face full of incomprehension as he took in the sight before him.

Chapter 172

It was impossible to tell who was more stunned. Growing as rigid as a statue, Maxi waited for Riftan to dissolve like a mirage. She would have preferred to crumble to dust over letting him see her in such a wretched state.

As always, fate cruelly turned its back on her. Riftan remained standing, wearing a stupefied expression she had never seen on him before.

The Duke of Croyso came to his senses first. He wrenched his hand away and looked back and forth between the wide-open door and the unexpected intruder. His face slowly twisted in outrage.

"How did you get in here? You dare break into my castle?! Do not think I will overlook this transgression! If you do not leave this instant—"

"I asked…"

Riftan's voice was toneless and calm, yet somehow chilling enough to make the imperious duke pause. Finally pulling his gaze away from Maxi, Riftan turned to the duke and continued.

"…what in the devil it is you are doing?"

Maxi had never seen her father look so flustered. He flinched and backed away from whatever it was that he glimpsed in Riftan's eyes. His face flushed as though humiliated.

"Enough with the self-righteous act! This is hardly scandalous. As her father, I was merely correcting her vile manners. It is a parent's duty to discipline their children."

"Discipline?" Riftan cocked his head as though unable to comprehend the duke's words. "You call this… discipline?"

His voice was uncannily low and flat. When his gaze returned to her, Maxi shrunk into herself and clutched at her dress until her knuckles turned white. His eyes swept over her disheveled hair, bruised face, and her back full of twisted lacerations like swollen

worms. Maxi had never felt so pitiful in her life. She hung her head, unable to meet his gaze.

"There is a hierarch waiting downstairs," she heard her father say tersely. "She won't have a scratch on her once she is treated with divine magic! Such efforts are required for instilling obedience in daughters."

The duke haughtily raised his pointed chin as if displeased by the fact that he had been made to justify himself.

"Now, it is your turn to explain yourself. How in God's name did you get in here? Did I not tell you to go back? I'm sure you are well aware that infiltrating a lord's castle is a crime… Are you prepared to face the consequences?"

Riftan merely stared at the duke in silence. Unsettled by Riftan's calm gaze, the duke nervously clicked his tongue and flicked his wrist.

"First, I want you out of here. We will continue this conversation in the drawing room. I pray for your sake that you have a proper excuse."

"I see," Riftan said after a long silence.

He stood like a statue, his face as inexpressive as plaster. Then, he slowly turned and walked toward the door. Maxi watched his retreating back in disbelief. A coldness as though all her blood had drained away settled over her.

The shock prevented her from calling out to him. Her mouth dumbly flapped open and closed when Riftan stopped just before the door. He grabbed a chair by the entrance and walked back to Maxi and the duke.

His face was so placid that neither of them understood what was happening until he raised the chair by its leg.

The wooden chair struck the duke's bony figure. Maxi's eyes widened. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. The chair splintered, sending chunks of wood flying in every direction. The duke sailed through the air like a scarecrow before crashing onto the floor. A bizarre scream filled with pain and outrage burst out of him.

"Y-You scum…! Y-You dare…!"

With a look of sheer shock, the duke shakily raised his torso and looked up at Riftan in disbelief.

His white hair was always meticulously swept back with not a single hair out of place. It was now a disheveled mess, and blood dripped from his mouth. His contorted face was devil-like as he shook a finger at Riftan.

"Y-You dare?! You dare to strike me?!"

The duke's shrieks grated like a screeching iron gate.

He shakily got to his feet and bellowed, "Guards! Guards! Take this— *Ugh*!"

Riftan strode over and kicked the duke in the stomach. The duke collapsed back onto the floor, his face turning blue. He choked on the blood and vomit that poured out of his mouth.

Maxi watched in stunned silence. It was unimaginable that the tyrant who had dominated her entire life could be so weak and helpless.

Riftan lifted the writhing duke by the neck and slammed him against the wall. The impact made the old man's body flail like a broken doll.

Crushing the duke's head against the wall, Riftan muttered flatly, "Why are you causing such a scene? Surely you could have a hierarch heal you as well, no?"

"*Uhhhh…*"

The duke flailed his long legs. His face was blue with shock and fear. Having never suffered such pain in his life, he whimpered and frantically tried to free himself. He thrashed and clawed at Riftan's armored forearm.

Riftan did not budge. Gazing at the duke as though he were nothing but a squirming insect, Riftan raised his fist.

At that moment, someone came rushing into the room.

"Commander!"

Elliot and Ursuline, both dressed in black robes, rushed to Riftan's side. When they tried to pull him away, Riftan's previously emotionless face contorted viciously.

"Get your hands off me!"

"Think, Commander! Even you won't be pardoned—"

Riftan shoved them away without much effort. He then hoisted the crawling duke back up and swung his fist.

The blow crushed the duke's jaw like clay, and his eyes rolled back into his head. Riftan raised his fist once more, not caring that the duke's head now slumped back. Elliot flung himself at Riftan and barely managed to stop another blow.

"Commander! You'll kill him! A serious strike from you will kill him instantly!"

Riftan thrashed against the knight like a chained beast and screamed. Filled with despair, Maxi looked on. Her father lay sprawled on the floor, his face bloody and his eyes rolled up into his head.

Someone else came running into the room, and Maxi flinched away in recognition.

Ruth took in the scene in one stupefied sweep. His eyes grew wide when he saw Maxi, the color draining from his face.

"By God… My lady… What…?" he said, reaching out to her.

"Do not touch her!"

In an instant, Riftan pushed the knights away and ran to Maxi. He slapped Ruth's hand away. The sight of him losing all reason made Maxi recoil, and she hunched her shoulders inward like a turtle.

Clearly frightened by Riftan's murderous aura as well, Ruth hesitated before he spoke.

"Calm down," he said as though trying to pacify an agitated beast. "I'm only trying to heal her."

The look on Riftan's face made it clear that Ruth's words were not sinking in. His dilated eyes darted about like a man possessed, and his blanched face twisted. Ruth approached cautiously, trying not to agitate him further.

"I won't touch her. I will only heal her with magic."

Riftan stiffened as Ruth reached toward Maxi again. This time, he did not push the sorcerer's hand away. Feeling the pain slowly ease, Maxi finally let out the breath she had been holding.

As the pain faded, her battered pride made itself known as a dull ache. Raising her dress to her chin, she glanced at Riftan, Ruth, and

the shocked knights before hiding her face beneath her disheveled hair.

Shame and humiliation stabbed at her. She wanted nothing more than to turn to dust and disappear.

"There, all done."

When Ruth pulled his hand back, Riftan removed his robe and wrapped it around Maxi. He then picked her up and strode toward the door.

It felt like floating above cold clouds. Gripped by the unsettling sensation, Maxi looked about nervously and spotted Rosetta standing to one side of the darkened corridor. Her sister slowly walked toward them and icily gazed down at their father's limp and bloodied body.

"Is he dead?" she asked flatly.

Elliot was bent over the duke, checking his condition.

"No, but he just might die if you don't call the cleric immediately," he said calmly.

Rosetta merely nodded and made no move to call for a cleric. Maxi stared at her sister. This entire situation felt impossible to get her head around. Had she passed out during the beating, hence this strange dream?

Her beautiful sister, the apple of her father's eye, glanced indifferently away from the duke and pointed down the unlit corridor.

"I've asked a maidservant to lace the guards' food with a sleeping draught, but the knights and soldiers in the eastern wing are still awake. They would've heard the commotion and are headed this way. You should leave before they get here."

With that, she spun around. Her cold eyes flicked to Riftan and Maxi before looking away.

"Please remember that I know nothing about this matter."

"We will make sure you are not implicated, Lady Rosetta," Ursuline replied curtly.

Rosetta was the embodiment of grace and calm as she walked away. Maxi vacantly stared after her before Riftan turned and began striding in the direction Rosetta had pointed.

No one spoke as they moved down the long corridor and descended the stairs. The heavy silence still hung over them as they got to the first floor and made toward the garden. As they approached the back gate, the Croyso guards stopped them at sword-point. The soldiers gasped as they recognized Riftan.

Her father's favored knight stepped out from the group of guards and shouted imperiously, "What is the meaning of this? You dare to infiltrate our castle? Are you not aware that this is grounds for war?"

The knight's self-assuredness vanished when he saw the glint in Riftan's eyes.

"Exactly what I want," Riftan said in a frighteningly grim voice. "I will raze this land to the ground, along with you and all of your families."

At least fifteen of the guards faltered and backed away, their faces frozen in fear. They knew that standing against Wedon's greatest knightly order was a fool's game. Elliot broke the nerve-racking tension as he stepped forward to mediate.

"Everyone here knows that Lady Maximilian is now a Calypse. The duke had no right to confine her in Croyso Castle in the first place! Let us be clear that it was the duke who was out of line first."

"Lady Maximilian is His Grace's daughter! He never confined her __"

"Elliot, enough with the talking," said Ursuline, drawing his sword. He had clearly reached the end of his patience. "Croyso and Anatol are now enemies. That being the case, we simply dispose of them and leave."

Apparently deciding that they would not be able to subdue Riftan and his men with just their number, the commanding knight motioned with his head for the guards to let them through.

Riftan strode past them with Elliot and Ursuline on either side, their swords drawn. Outside the castle, a chilly wind brushed Maxi's tear-stained cheek. She leaned her face against Riftan's cold, armored chest and curled herself in his arms.

Talon was tied to a nearby tree. Riftan mounted his horse after helping Maxi onto the saddle. It was not until she heard hooves against the ground that the sobbing began, racking her whole body.

As she silently wept, she could not tell if this feeling in her chest was relief or despair.

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No one spoke of the events that occurred in Croyso Castle. The rest of the knights waiting outside did not ask any questions, as if they could sense the tension enveloping the returning party.

They traveled across the darkened plain without rest until the village of Zeno came into view.

Maxi blinked her stinging eyes at the dim lights glowing in the dark. Raising her head, she could vaguely make out Riftan's tense jaw. Riftan did not spare her a glance as he spurred his horse into a gallop down the hill.

When they reached Zeno, Riftan and the knights booked out a large inn at the southern end of the village. Moving as one, the knights dismounted, left their horses to the stables, and organized the luggage.

Riftan carried Maxi up the stairs. After gently lowering her onto the bed in one of the rooms, he walked over to light the lamp by the window.

Maxi hugged her knees as she sat as motionless as a rock. Riftan's face had been shrouded in darkness up until now. As he lit the lamp, the flickering light revealed his expression.

Chapter 173

Maxi took a deep breath, filling her lungs with his scent. His robes smelled of horses and the metallic tang of iron armor.

With both hands resting on the windowsill, Riftan stared out the window at the night sky illuminated by a crescent moon. Maxi could feel the tension exuding from him even through his armor.

She did not know what to say. She stared at his motionless figure before lowering her gaze to her knees. A knock interrupted the silence.

"Sir Riftan, I've brought you hot water."

It was Ruth. Riftan slowly turned around and opened the door. Light streamed in from the hallway, and Maxi crawled to the corner of the bed to avoid it. She caught a glimpse of Ruth trying to peer past Riftan's shoulder with a concerned look.

"I also have some clean linen and a change of clothes. As for your meal…"

"Bring it in an hour."

Riftan's bulky frame blocked the doorway, barring Ruth's entry. After taking the basin, towels, and clothes, he closed the door on Ruth's face before the sorcerer could say anything else.

Maxi nervously watched Riftan approach the bed. He placed the basin on the bedside table and soaked a towel in steaming water. After wringing it out, he brought the hot towel to her face.

When Maxi shrunk back reflexively, his lips grew stiff, and he muttered in a strangely tense voice, "Let me help you wipe off the blood."

"Oh…"

Riftan gently wiped her forehead, temples, and cheeks. It was only when she saw the dark bloodstains on the linen that Maxi realized she had been bleeding. Ruth had healed the wounds, but the blood must have remained.

When her face was clean, Riftan pulled off her robe and began to wipe her pale shoulders and back. Maxi gave herself over to his care, feeling pathetic. Each time the warm towel swept down her back, it felt as though it were exposing more of her shame. It made her face burn, and she desperately wanted to hide.

Riftan paid no heed to her discomfort and relentlessly wiped the dried blood on her back. Feeling the slight tremor of his fingers against her skin, she anxiously gnawed her lip. Riftan continued washing her, changing the towel several times, before he finally spoke.

"How often did this happen?"

Maxi hunched her shoulders and looked away. After frantically glancing about the room like an animal seeking an escape route, she forced a stiff smile.

"W-What… do you mean?"

She heard him take in a sharp breath. Feigning ignorance, she fiddled with her tangled hair with shaking hands. Riftan did not relent, using his silence to demand an answer.

Maxi tried and failed to ignore the pressure. She said awkwardly, "I-It didn't… h-happen that often. My father… w-was greatly angered today… that's why… he p-punished me. Th-This usually… doesn't…"

Riftan impassively observed her desperate attempt to preserve what little pride she had left. His penetrating gaze made Maxi's face flush.

"M-My father is a s-stern man… o-on the rare occasions he got angry, he—"

"Since when?" Riftan prodded, heartlessly ignoring her pitiful efforts to paint the matter as inconsequential.

Maxi pressed herself against the wall, her breathing turning ragged as though she were cornered.

She needed a shield, something to cover herself with. How was she to contend with a fully-armored man when she was as vulnerable as a newborn babe, her shame on full display? Maxi pulled the blanket up like a barrier and glared at him. His cruel efforts to dredge up her deepest shame filled her with hostility.

"W-What is it that you wish to know? Do you… r-really want to kn-know… w-when it began… a-and how often I was beaten?"

The knuckles of his hand clutching the towel went white. Maxi's chest heaved. She had to admit that even she thought her attempt to keep up appearances despite the evidence was absurd.

"If you w-want to know so badly… Th-The beatings started when I was eight, w-when it became clear… that I had a speech impediment. I-I was made to read a poem out loud i-in front of my father… twice a week. W-Whenever I did poorly… he would punish me… in that room."

Despair clawed at her as she spat out the words. Faced with the truth, Riftan hung his head. She had never seen him look so devastated.

Clutching his forehead, he said in a hoarse voice, "I… wasn't planning on bringing you back with me to Anatol."

All the fight completely drained out of Maxi. She gazed at him as if she were bleeding to death but could not tell whether or not Riftan was aware. He kept his eyes on the floor where the shadows cast by the lamp flickered and swayed.

Looking like a man in a daze, he continued, "I thought it would be better for you to remain here. I kept telling myself, again and again, the entire way here… that I should let you stay if that was what you wanted. That I'd only go see you to make sure you were well. I swore that I wouldn't drag you with me like last time…"

His voice grew more and more unsteady as he spoke. Riftan ruffled the shaggy hair over his forehead and drew a ragged breath.

"I practically begged the duke to let me see you just once. When he told me that you refused to see me, I thought the ground would swallow me up."

"I-I never—"

Maxi unwittingly cried out before snapping her mouth closed. Riftan's penetrating gaze flew to her again. Nervously plucking at the sheet, Maxi cast her eyes down.

"I-I never said such a thing. I-I never told my father that I didn't want to see you…"

"Then why did you follow that man there? For what reason?"

Riftan leaped to his feet and leaned down. Maxi pressed herself against the wall like a cornered mouse. As if to prevent her escape, he placed one hand on the wall next to her head and drew his face close to hers.

"Was being subjected to such atrocities preferable to waiting for me? Did you really choose to stay with a man like him over me?!"

"I-I… thought you never w-wanted… t-to see me again."

When she finally managed to get the words out, his sun-kissed face turned unnaturally pale.

Her voice shaking, Maxi added, "B-Because I lost… o-our baby…"

"You thought… I wouldn't want to see you again because of that?" he mumbled incredulously.

Biting her lip, Maxi glared at him through teary eyes. "W-What else… w-was I to think? Y-You told me t-to leave. Y-You wanted me to leave… without telling me anything…"

"I didn't want to see you get hurt anymore! Ever since I brought you to Anatol, you've ended up in danger numerous times. I blamed myself for everything when I saw you all bloodied! Why must you be the one to suffer when I was the one who fathered that child and made you return to that wretched place?! I am to blame for all of it!"

Maxi gaped at the heartbreaking outburst. She could no longer think of anything to say. Riftan continued to speak as though he were trying to pour out his innermost feelings.

"I should have just let you be. I shouldn't have taken you to Anatol! I knew from the start that you didn't want to marry me! If I truly wanted the best for you, I should have let you go when I returned from the Dragon Campaign. I even thought it would be better for you if I didn't return alive! That was all I could think about while you were unconscious…"

His voice cracked by the end. He shook violently as though trying to restrain himself, but a moment later, he grabbed her shoulders as if the urge proved too much.

"If it hadn't been for your sister, I would have left you there! Why did you never tell me… how that bastard treated you? If I'd known, I wouldn't have allowed him anywhere near you. I would have

protected you no matter what! Why didn't you tell me sooner? Why?!"

"I-I-I…"

Maxi struggled, but Riftan did not let her go. He cupped her face, leaving her no choice but to return his gaze. His blazing eyes razed the last of her defenses. She no longer had an ounce of pride or energy left to maintain her facade.

"Because… I-I liked how you treated me a-as if I was special…"

The tears that had welled up trickled down her cheeks. It did not occur to her to wipe them as she continued.

"But… I-I was nothing… Truly… n-nothing… I was… afraid that you would f-find out…"

Riftan looked as though someone had struck him in the head. Maxi squeezed her eyes shut, and the tears continued to stream.

"Y-You were… th-the last person I w-wanted to show this to. I-I didn't… want you to kn-know me. Y-You see it now, don't you? How could I… when I am… s-so pathetic…"

Maxi tried to force a smile on her quivering lips. She failed, and her face crumpled as the tears came bursting out of her.

"I… I am… ashamed…"

His grip on her shoulders fell away. Curling herself over her knees, Maxi covered her flushed face with her fists. Suppressed sobs escaped her lips. Standing in the middle of a square stark naked could not be more humiliating than this.

She wanted nothing more than to remain an exalted noblewoman in his eyes, for him to continue looking at her as though she were dazzling and not the way she was now — pathetic and miserable.

Maxi choked for air as a burning lump lodged itself in her throat. Her body shook, and her face was wet with hot tears. She could not keep it bottled any longer.

With her lips crushed together, she was tearing at the sheets when she heard Riftan's hoarse voice above her head.

"I… have had you in my thoughts for a very long time."

Maxi froze and looked up at him. With his arms limp at his sides, he seemed in a daze.

"You were always on my mind. Even when you knew nothing of my existence… I only thought of you."

He muttered it like a sacred confession.

"Oh…"

Unable to comprehend his words, Maxi could not speak. Salty tears seeped into her mouth, and she saw her reflection in his somber eyes.

"I felt hollow and miserable the more I saw you… But I couldn't stop."

His lip quivered slightly.

"I kept telling myself to quit. The more I thought of you, the lonelier I felt. Even surrounded by people, I was alone. Give up, I told myself. What's the point of wanting something you can't have? That's what I resolved to do, over and over… But my eyes would always seek you before I even realized it."

He pressed his fist on his forehead and squeezed his eyes shut.

"It's as if my heart no longer belongs to me. It ceased to be mine the moment I met you. So… how could you call yourself nothing? How could you be nothing?"

Maxi stared at Riftan in a daze as his broad shoulders gently shook. He hung his head like a soldier surrendering to the enemy the thing he had tried to protect to the bitter end. After numbly taking in the pitiful sight, Maxi slowly reached out and pulled his head to her chest.

Not knowing what else to say, she repeated his name over and over. How was this feeling of all-encompassing vulnerability and heartrending sadness humanly possible?

She had shattered not only herself but also Riftan into a thousand pieces. His body sagged against hers. Their silhouettes across the floor could not have looked more pitiful.

They dropped onto the bed like the rubble of a crumbling rampart. Maxi leaned her face against his cool shoulder.

She could no longer pinpoint the reason behind her tears. She simply rubbed her wet cheek against his black hair and poured out the things she had kept buried in her heart. They lay in each other's arms, motionless in the dark.

Chapter 174

Since they were unable to procure an adequate carriage in Zeno, Maxi had to ride double on Talon with Riftan. She sat in front with her back against his chest and watched the passing scenery.

Wheat stalks bent like bows, rustling in the breeze, and pale streaks of clouds drifted against the brilliant blue sky. Entrusting herself completely to Riftan's encircled arms, Maxi vacantly watched the landscape change.

On the third day, the Remdragon Knights rode through a vast grain field and traversed the Eudychal Forest. The absence of a carriage meant that they reached the Anatolium Plain in half the time it had taken the previous year.

As they prepared the camp in the middle of an open field, Gabel looked back at the road and muttered, "The journey was smoother than expected. I thought the duke would pursue us."

Maxi stiffened as Riftan helped her dismount from Talon. He coldly glared at Gabel.

"I hope you're not telling me you're afraid of the duke's knights."

Gabel's face flushed as though the comment wounded his pride. He flicked a glance at Maxi, then shrugged.

"It's best to avoid unnecessary conflict. Especially since her ladyship could get hurt again…"

"Go light a fire if you have the time to talk, Lachzion," Ursuline barked irritably as he unsaddled his luggage.

Grumbling under his breath, Gabel started gathering the dry branches around them. Maxi watched from the enclosure of Riftan's arms as the knights let the horses out to graze and began setting up the tents.

Not long after, a campfire blazed in the middle of the camp. Riftan placed a thick bedroll nearby and lowered Maxi onto it. He had kept her close throughout the journey, not allowing Ruth or the knights to

approach her. Tired of his testy mood, the knights sensibly steered clear of their commander.

Maxi wondered whether all of them knew the full extent of her wretched circumstances now. Had Ruth, Ursuline, or Elliot disclosed to the others what they had witnessed at Croyso Castle? Unable to bear the thought of the knights' pity, she was too ashamed to ask.

"Come here."

Riftan pulled Maxi closer to his side. She nestled against him like a chick burrowing under a hen and hugged her knees to her chest. When everything was ready, Riftan took her into their tent. He laid her on a blanket and proceeded to massage her stiff waist.

He set out her meal for her, and after obediently stuffing herself with bread and stew, Maxi slipped into the bedroll. The distant sounds of swirling winds, neighing horses, and crackling fire filled the night. After a stretch of silence, Riftan spoke into the dark.

"You don't have to worry about anything. I'll protect you."

Maxi knew he was referring to the Duke of Croyso. There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask. What would happen now? Did he truly have a plan? Regardless of his renown as a knight, he would be made to answer for his crime of assaulting a duke.

She held her breath as she recalled the gruesome sight of her father's battered body. If the knights had not restrained him, Riftan would have beaten her father to death. She was sure of it.

When his half-crazed state flashed in her mind, her thoughts immediately drifted to the things he had said to her that night. Had he been telling the truth, or had it been out of pity? Thinking back to his initial aloofness, it was difficult for her to believe that he had kept her in his thoughts for such a long time.

Even so, she did not dare voice her doubts. It would shatter the fragile peace between them. When she squeezed her eyes shut and turned on the bedroll to dispel her thoughts, Riftan drew her close.

"Stop worrying. Sleep. I won't let anyone hurt you ever again."

He spoke it like an oath. To her surprise, she felt the tension drain from her shoulders. She wound her arm around his sturdy waist.

Whenever she was entwined with him like this, as if locked in a comfortable fortress, all the anxiety within her washed away. Maxi's

eyes fluttered closed as she breathed him in.

The next day, they crossed the mountain and reached Anatol by late afternoon. They galloped down the hill as if riding the wind. The sentries spotted them from afar and began turning the pulleys so that the gates stood wide open by the time they reached the entrance.

Days of traveling on horseback had Maxi feeling utterly spent. When the returning party entered the city, it took a second to notice the astonishing change. Anatol was beyond recognition.

Massive structures she had never seen before stood all over the city, and stalls full of exotic wares from the Southern Continent lined either side of the expanded road. The people browsing erupted into cheers when they saw the knights, and the streets began to fill as more and more citizens flocked to them.

Maxi was stunned by the crowd's exuberant cheers for their lord. The Anatolians waved branches full of dangling red figs at the knights. Riftan was the paragon of dignity as he led the returning party through the crowd.

As they entered the city square, one of the knights rode up to the front.

"Commander, we've instructed the gatekeeper to heighten security."

Maxi anxiously looked up at Riftan. He nodded to the knight and spurred his horse on.

Breaking through the crowd, they cut across the birch forest and up the steep hill toward the castle. Sentries promptly lowered the drawbridge, and Maxi let out a sigh of relief as they crossed. She was finally home.

"Commander!"

Knights doing drills in the training grounds rushed to greet them as they entered the castle. Except for Riftan and the thirty or so men that had traveled to her father's duchy, the rest of the Remdragon Knights had returned to Anatol first.

Hebaron, who led the party that had gone ahead, patted each of the arriving knights on the shoulder. Maxi released a small sigh of

relief when she saw that he was in full health.

A sympathetic smile tugged at the knight's lips when he spotted Maxi shadowing Riftan.

"Welcome back, my lady. I hope the journey was not too hard on you."

Riftan's face hardened when Hebaron approached her. He pulled Maxi closer and ordered, "Tighten security at once."

Hebaron looked at him in surprise, but Rifan turned away as though he could not be bothered to explain.

"Double the men on the wall and restrict entry to the city for the meantime."

With that, Riftan led Maxi toward the great hall as if expecting the other knights to fill in the blanks for Hebaron. Maxi glanced around at the grave faces. Though she had managed to feign ignorance so far, she could not do so any longer. She had to ask.

"W-What… will happen now? W-Will there really be war…?"

"We are only taking precautions," said Riftan. "That man doesn't have it in him to lead an army here."

He quickened his steps. When Maxi staggered, unable to match him, he hoisted her up in his arms.

"I don't want you to worry about anything. You only need to concentrate on getting better. Let me deal with that man."

"W-What do you intend to do?"

Was he truly going to wage war on her father? Ignoring her panicked expression, Riftan cut across the garden and climbed up the steps to the great hall. Inside, Rodrigo and the servants scurried over to greet them.

"Welcome back, my lord, my lady. It is a relief to have you both home safe—"

"Bring me a bath and some food. A change of clothes, too."

Barely acknowledging their greeting, Riftan started up the carpeted stairs. His breathing remained steady despite climbing two floors without stopping.

Before she knew it, they were in their bedchamber. Relief flooded her when she saw that it was exactly the same as she had left it.

Riftan nimbly stepped over the cats that were rubbing themselves on his legs and lowered Maxi on the bed.

"Sit here while I light the fire."

With that, he strode over to the hearth without bothering to remove his armor. Maxi watched as he skillfully started a blaze after only a few strikes of the flint. He stoked the flames with the bellows before returning to the bed to help her remove her shoes.

Maxi watched him with a strange sense of nervousness. She could see his anxious black eyes beneath his wind-tousled hair. The moment he opened his mouth to say something, a knock came at the door.

"Your bath, my lord."

It was Ludis's voice. When Riftan gave them permission to enter, the maidservants hauled a large tub of steaming water into the room. Maxi forced a smile at the familiar faces. Ludis smiled back, but her expression faded when she noticed Maxi's pallor.

"My lady, are you hurt—"

"Put the bath next to the fire and get out," Riftan barked before Ludis could finish her question.

The maidservants flinched and hastily dragged the tub over.

"I-I… will leave the towels and new clothes here. Please call us if you need anything."

After Ludis led the maidservants out of the room, Riftan removed his armor and set it on the stand. He then gingerly helped Maxi to her feet.

"Come, I'll help you bathe."

"Y-You don't—"

"I won't do anything. I'm just trying to take care of you."

Maxi reluctantly nodded. Riftan removed her robe and pulled the loose tunic over her head.

Now clad only in a thin chemise, socks, and undergarments, Maxi covered her chest with her arms. The action was more out of embarrassment than shyness. She had lost a lot of weight in the past few weeks, and her stomach was more sunken skin rather than flat.

Though she was certain Riftan had already seen it all, being exposed in such a bright room made her worry that he might find her unsightly.

Feeling the goosebumps on her waist, Riftan muttered in a hoarse voice, "Are you cold?"

"N-No."

Riftan knelt and removed her socks one by one, tossing them on the floor. He then pulled the chemise over her head. The light from the fireplace softly outlined her body.

Maxi watched anxiously as Riftan brushed his fingers over her protruding ribs. As they passed down her scrawny back, his face suddenly twisted in anguish.

"I should have ripped that man to pieces," he snarled, pressing his face to her stomach.

Maxi tentatively stroked his hair. His hand crept across her back in search of wounds that were no longer there. She could feel his breathing becoming ragged.

An unexplainable feeling took over her. How was it that she meant so much to him? She wanted to unpack his heart, but at the same time, she was terrified of what she might find. Though a part of her wanted to believe him, another part theorized that what he felt was in fact pity and that he had merely misconstrued his own feelings.

Was it truly possible for a person to receive unconditional love without having done anything? How could a complete stranger feel such love for her when her own family did not? Even this man's passion might one day melt away.

As always, whenever such doubts filled her, she was equally as full with self-reproach. It was possible that she had permanently lost the ability to trust another human. She might never be able to fully give herself over as long as she lived. Overwhelmed with guilt, she curled up and hugged Riftan's head.

"W-We are home now… E-Everything will be all right."

Riftan's hulking frame shook pitifully. After holding Maxi for a long while, he finished undressing her and carried her to the tub. He gently lowered her into the warm water and bathed her like a devoted servant tending to a queen.

Chapter 175

Although Maxi knew that Riftan must have been just as tired, she found herself unable to refuse his attentive care. The delicate way he handled her like fragile glass was a balm to her battered mind and body.

Leaning her head against the tub, Maxi watched him caress her skin, the tendons showing stark on his bronze hands. She felt her blood warming and her tense muscles easing.

"Sleep if you're tired. I'll get you dressed and tuck you in."

Riftan hugged her from behind and kissed her temple. He did not seem to mind that the sleeves he had rolled up to his elbows were soaked.

Maxi gazed at his hair, damp from the steam, and at his flushed cheekbones before allowing her heavy eyelids to close. The rattling window and trickling water created a strange symphony that echoed in her ears. Enveloped in a peaceful yet somber mood, Maxi drifted off to sleep.

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Now back at Calypse Castle, Maxi's health bounced back. Riftan's life mission seemed to be putting more flesh on her bones, and everyone in the castle appeared to have joined the effort.

Every morning's breakfast consisted of chicken stew and a variety of vegetable dishes. Once her appetite returned, the menu changed to fattened pheasant, duck, lamb, and veal. It was usually followed by dessert — sweetened cakes drizzled with honey and cinnamon alongside an array of peculiar fruits from the Southern Continent.

The road construction had been completed during their time away, and Anatol's markets were now brimming with all kinds of rare

ingredients. Riftan seemed determined to present all the cuisines of the world to her.

Maxi huffed a small sigh when she saw Riftan enter their chambers bearing a tray of food that looked much too bountiful for two people.

"I-I will become a hog… i-if I keep eating like this every day."

"Please, do." Placing the tray next to the bed, Riftan swept his eyes over her scrawny body. "You need more meat on you. Come now, eat."

He placed the spoon in her hand as if she were a fussy child. Today's meal was steamed sea bass drenched in cameline sauce and a huge slice of goose pie. Maxi shoveled small pieces into her mouth under Riftan's watchful gaze.

While she ate, Riftan sliced the large chunk of wine-cooked meat that was also on the tray into bite-sized pieces. Maxi obediently took some whenever he proffered a forkful. The relief that flickered across his face whenever the meals diminished was what fuelled her efforts, but he never seemed to be satisfied.

After managing to finish a third of the food, Maxi lowered her cutlery onto the tray.

Riftan lifted another piece of meat. "A little more."

"I-I really am… full."

"Just one more bite, then."

Maxi resignedly opened her mouth. Although all this gorging made her feel like a sack of grain, she was willing to endure being bloated for a few hours if it reassured her husband.

Still chewing, Maxi gave Riftan a sideways glance as he called for a maidservant to take the tray away. His overprotectiveness had worsened several times over after seeing her in such a wretched state. Though he reluctantly left their chambers to fulfill his duties as lord of the castle, he came to check on her every few hours and always brought her meals himself.

She had regained much of her energy, and the only thing that kept her cooped up in her chambers now was Riftan's excessive worrying. Even so, she could not bring herself to complain knowing that his uneasiness was her own doing.

Maxi let out a surreptitious sigh. "A-Are winter preparations… going well? A-Are you sure there is nothing I can—"

"You stocked up all the necessary supplies last year, so we only have to prepare enough food."

Riftan furrowed his brow and turned to look at her as he washed his hands in the basin.

"And even that is almost done. Rodrigo has been working on it using your ledger from last year as a reference."

"W-What about the infirmary?"

"Ruth and Melric are managing that. There are fewer patients lately since there aren't as many monsters."

His reply was smooth as if he had practiced it. Maxi's face fell upon hearing that everything had been going fine without her.

The crease on Riftan's forehead deepened. "You were on death's door, then that hellish experience… Don't worry about anything else. Just focus on getting better."

It was as though he still saw her bleeding before him. When Maxi noticed the tinge of pain in his ebony eyes, she quickly changed the topic.

"I-Isn't this the busiest time of year for you? You don't need to… s-spare so much time for me. I'm feeling much b-better… and you must have m-more important matters…"

"You are the most important thing."

Maxi flinched at his sudden gruffness. Riftan's lips stiffened, and he slowly cast his eyes down. A cautious silence fell over them. Lately, they both seemed afraid that they might end up hurting the other person's feelings. Perhaps it was inevitable after having seen each other in their most vulnerable state.

As if the silence was getting on his nerves, Riftan irritably rubbed his forehead. "I… like watching you eat. I used to imagine preparing all sorts of delicacies for you."

Maxi blinked at him, stunned. "W-When?"

There was a pause.

"The first time I attended a banquet at Croyso Castle," he replied brusquely, shifting in his seat.

Maxi tried to think back to how long ago that would have been.

Riftan added anxiously, “The table was full of dishes I’d never seen or heard of before, and the servants would bring out new ones even before a plate was empty. But you sat meekly beside the duke, staring down at the table. I… used to watch to see what dishes you liked.”

Maxi felt her face flush. She looked at him hesitantly, but he avoided her gaze.

“When I was alone, I would imagine sitting at a table with you, just the two of us. I wanted to hold banquets as grand as your father’s… No, even grander, and make sure you had your fill of the finest cuisines every day. You’ve no idea how many times I imagined your eyes shining in the candlelight, your content smile… How I wished you’d raise your head to look at me just—”

Riftan cut himself off, evidently thinking that he had said too much. As if to hide his faint blush, he ran a hand through his hair and muttered in a self-deprecating tone, “A childish delusion.”

“E-Even my father… d-does not do that every day. H-He only puts on… such lavish banquets… to flaunt his wealth to guests.”

Unable to bear her fluttering heart, Maxi fixed her eyes on her lap. Even her fingers were flushed with a rosy tinge. She wriggled her toes under the blanket as she continued.

“Th-The food in Anatol… is s-so much better. I-I’ve never been able to… enjoy s-such diverse dishes regularly before.”

A coldness glinted in Riftan’s eyes. “Did that man ever starve you?”

“N-No! That never happened. More specifically… my father n-never cared… whether I ate o-or not.”

Riftan stared into her eyes as if to ascertain if she were telling the truth.

“I want to know everything about you,” he said, emphasizing each word. “Nothing matters to me more than your well-being and happiness. So don’t look so disheartened — it makes me want to kill that man whenever I see you like that.”

“I-I…” Maxi gulped and barely managed to continue. “I don’t… understand… w-why you would care for me so much…”

Riftan’s face grew cold.

"I can't explain it," he replied after a while.

He stared down at his fist before abruptly pulling her toward him. Maxi hunched her shoulders when she felt his warm lips against the pulsing vein in her neck. After pressing his cheek to her hair, he rose with a sigh.

"You should take a nap. I'll be back with supper."

Maxi watched him leave the room. Her heart stirred at the revelation that someone had thought of her during a time when she firmly believed no one did. She felt both the exhilaration of floating on clouds and the anxiousness of being adrift in a vast ocean.

Maxi clasped her trembling hands. Riftan had wanted her without knowing anything about her. Was he simply pouring his affection into a fantasy he had created while stubbornly denying the truth?

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Though the color had returned to her cheeks and she had gained some weight, she was still unsightly. Her red hair was like tangled vines, and brown freckles spattered her nose and cheekbones. Her nose was too small while her eyes were unnaturally big.

Maxi frowned as she scrutinized her unbalanced features. She was in no way a beauty that could make such a striking man fall in love with her at first sight. What was more, Rosetta had also been at Croyso Castle. How could Maxi have caught his eye over her angelic sister? Tucking her overgrown, curly bangs behind her ears, Maxi heaved an uneasy sigh.

The black cat, Roy, sauntered over from his spot near the fireplace and climbed onto her lap. Maxi stroked his soft fur and turned her gaze to the window. Bare branches and clear, blue sky filled her vision. Feeling stifled, she walked over to it and swung it open. Servants bustled about in the garden below.

Maxi sat idly watching them when she spotted about fifteen men cut through the garden accompanied by the Remdragon Knights. The newcomers carried longswords and wore somewhat peculiar clothing; they appeared to be from the Southern Continent. Maxi narrowed her eyes. They were clearly not merchants.

A knock came at her door.

"Your tonic, my lady."

"C-Come in."

Ludis entered the room with a tray. She stopped when she saw Maxi standing by the window.

"The weather's quite chilly today, my lady. You might catch a cold in that icy wind…"

"A-A little… shouldn't hurt. More importantly… do you know who those men are?"

Ludis put down the tray and walked over. Her face grew uncertain when she saw the Southern men climbing the stairs to the great hall.

Seeing the maidservant hesitate, Maxi frowned and said with a slight reprimand in her voice, "D-Do you think it would do for the lady of the castle… t-to be the only person who doesn't know who our guests are?"

"T-To my knowledge…" said Ludis tentatively, "they are mercenaries, my lady. I heard his lordship intends to hire a large number of the men that served as guards for the big merchant guilds up from the south…"

Maxi's face fell. "F-For what reason?"

"That, I do not know, my lady. The little I do know is from what I've overheard from the knights…"

Ludis studied Maxi's face, looking worried that she might have said too much. Maxi turned back to the window. The men must have entered the castle, as they were nowhere to be seen.

Was it truly necessary to hire that many foreign mercenaries just to protect Anatol? Or was Riftan set on waging war? The hairs on her forearm stood on end. Seeing Maxi hug herself, Ludis hurriedly shut the window.

"I shall close this now, my lady. You don't look well."

A flurry of thoughts went through Maxi's head as Ludis ushered her to the bed. It would not be in Riftan's interest to start a war without just cause. King Reuben would never tolerate anything that could disrupt the current order in the kingdom. On the other hand, the Duke of Croyso was not one to let a transgression pass.

After gnawing her lip, Maxi bolted to her feet and threw on her robe.

Ludis looked startled, pausing in her pouring of the tonic. “My lady, you mustn’t go out—”

“I-I am not trying… to go outside. I just… want to see our guests. Do you know where they were escorted to?”

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Maxi held the door handle as she waited for a reply. Ludis hesitated, a troubled expression on her face.

"His lordship ordered that the guests be served food upon their arrival," said the maidservant reluctantly. "They will likely be in the dining hall."

As soon as she heard the answer, Maxi swung open the door and stepped out. Though she was aware of Ludis's quick steps behind her, she ignored her and hurried down the stairs.

Servers bustled about bearing trays laden with wine and food. Ignoring their surprised faces, Maxi cautiously approached the dining hall. She ducked into the corridor just outside, where the sonorous voices of the knights filtered through. The men spoke in a mixture of Southern and Western languages, and the only thing she could discern was that they were talking about stallions and weapons. It was difficult to pick out further details.

Maxi's brows furrowed at the banal nature of the conversation. Judging by the boisterous chatter, it did not seem like they were gathered to discuss any matters of importance.

Are they really hired just to bolster Anatol's defenses?

Maxi considered peeping through the gap in the door but thought against it. At this angle, the knights could easily spot her. She was straining to hear the conversation when someone tapped her shoulder. Maxi jumped and turned to find Ruth frowning at her.

"Might I ask what you're doing out here, my lady?"

Embarrassed at having been caught eavesdropping, Maxi's cheeks grew hot. She hastily straightened her back.

"W-Well…"

Ruth's eyes narrowed as he watched her absently fiddle with her hair. Maxi looked down. They had not had the opportunity to speak

properly after the events at Croyso Castle, and she did not know what expression to put on in front of him.

Flustered, Maxi barely managed to continue speaking. "I heard that… we had guests…"

"You must have seen the mercenaries from Lakazim." Ruth glanced toward the dining hall and clicked his tongue as if to say it was an easy guess. "Is that why you raced down here to eavesdrop?"

"E-Eavesdrop? Y-You offend me."

At his accusation, Maxi forgot her earlier discomfort and glowered at him. Ruth stared at her for a moment before turning away with a snicker.

"Sir Riftan will give you an earful if he catches you loitering like this. Come with me."

Without waiting for an answer, he started up the narrow servants' stairwell. Ludis had followed her and now hovered behind like a shadow. Maxi looked at the maidservant, then to the dining hall where the voices of the knights leaked through. She turned and reluctantly went after Ruth.

Upon entering the drawing room on the second floor, Ruth threw open the curtains and lit a brazier with magic. He pulled a chair close to the fire and sat down.

"Are you well now, my lady?"

Maxi nodded, remaining awkwardly in the doorway. "I-I've… gotten much better."

"I wished to check on you personally, but his lordship simply would not allow it," he muttered bitterly, then motioned with his head for her to join him.

Ludis had trailed after Maxi to the drawing room. After asking the maidservant to bring them something to drink, Maxi cautiously sat across from Ruth. A moment of silence passed before he spoke.

"I'm relieved to see you looking well. Are you taking your tonics on time?"

"Y-Yes. Thank you… for your concern."

After fidgeting with her skirt, Maxi plucked up the courage to look up at him. She saw that there were no traces of pity or discomfort in

the sorcerer's eyes.

Watching him poke at the fire with his typical bored, indifferent expression drained the tension from her shoulders. She exhaled in relief at his unchanged manner and asked her most pressing question.

"W-Why… are those men here? Why are we h-hiring mercenaries from the Southern Continent?"

"Has Sir Riftan not told you anything?" Ruth asked in lieu of an answer.

Maxi hesitated before nodding. Ruth looked uncertain for a moment, but he heaved a sigh and disclosed the truth.

"Sir Riftan has formally declared war on the Duchy of Croyso."

Maxi felt her whole body freeze. Though she had half expected this, having someone confirm it sent her heart plummeting.

Seeing the color drain from Maxi's face, Ruth quickly added, "It was a decision made after thorough deliberation. The Remdragon Knights have been ill-disposed to the Duke of Croyso for a long time now. War was inevitable."

"B-But… no one spoke of war until now. It's my fault… th-that things have come to this…"

Ruth opened then closed his mouth as though unable to think of an adequate reply. Maxi's face fell, and her clasped hands trembled. Guilt pressed on her chest. She bit her lip at the weight of it when she heard Ruth's somber voice.

"It is too late. Sir Riftan infiltrated Croyso Castle and assaulted the duke. Though he has remained silent so far, the duke is not one to let such offenses slide. It would be better for us to strike first."

"B-But… the A-Armistice of the Seven Kingdoms prohibits war. King Reuben… w-would never pardon it."

Ruth shrugged as if to say that this had also been taken into consideration.

"You are correct," he said, sounding indifferent. "It is highly likely that the king will impose sanctions, but we have enough reason to justify our declaration of war. It is indisputable that you now belong to Anatol, and that the duke no longer has any say in your affairs. The fact that he harmed you is grounds enough for war. We can

assert our validity and go through with this even if the royal family interferes."

Maxi flinched. She had to ask.

"Do the rest of the knights… kn-know everything?"

Ruth immediately grasped the vague question. Hesitating briefly, he rubbed the back of his neck and bobbed his head.

"It's not that I, Sir Elliot, or Sir Ursuline said anything. I'm sure everyone was able to figure out that the duke had done some grievous harm to you. I'd say Sir Riftan's demeanor and those of the men who accompanied him were a dead giveaway."

Ruth then tentatively added, "To tell you the truth, quite a few brought up practical reasons to oppose the war. But those in favor of it were far more adamant. Sir Riftan is not the only one who is angry… The knights are furious too. I don't think anything will be able to stop them."

Flustered and unsure of how to react, Maxi fixed her gaze on the floor. Ruth heaved an exaggerated sigh as if to dispel the heavy air.

"As you know," he continued, "those creatures we call knights will not be content unless they brandish their swords in the name of honor and chivalry. Please don't let this trouble you too much. They'll calm down after they've fought it out."

"I… c-cannot think s-so lightly of a war! Th-There is no need for the Remdragon Knights to do this… for my sake…"

"My lady," said Ruth, his voice growing heavy.

Maxi flinched and raised her head. The sorcerer regarded her with a solemn expression as he spoke.

"You are not only the Lady of Anatol but a mage of the Remdragon Knights. And the knights never forgive those who harm one of their own. The majority were in favor of the war, and even those who opposed for pragmatic reasons are inwardly in agreement."

"Th-That's…"

At a loss for words, Maxi dumbly opened and closed her mouth. Her heart fluttered as she recalled how she had once envied the bond shared by Riftan, Ruth, and the knights. Since when had she

become one of them? Noticing her bewilderment, Ruth gave her a bitter smile.

"You fought for the people at Eth Lene with no regard for your own safety. It is the same for us now. The Remdragon Knights have the right to be angry and to retaliate against those who would harm you."

"I-I…"

Maxi bit her quivering lip. Her eyes grew hot, and she felt a choking sensation as though she had swallowed lead. If she had not followed her father to Croyso Castle, Riftan and the knights would not have had any reason to wage this war.

If only she had not been so weak and had been brave enough to face Riftan. If only she had trusted people. If only she had not abused her body…

Squeezing her eyes shut, Maxi mustered up the strength to continue talking.

"I am grateful… but… I-I still… do not w-want a war. I never wish to see… s-such a terrible tragedy again."

"It won't become an all-out war," Ruth said resolutely. "Although Sir Riftan wants to raze the duchy to the ground, doing so would give us no loopholes to avoid the sanctions for breaking the armistice. It's why armed conflicts between territories are settled through cavalry battles. Knights of both territories will face off, and the winner will be determined after several battles. It's not uncommon for a war to be won in a single fight by taking out the opposition's commanding officer. It's a completely different nature from monster raids."

"E-Even so… we won't be able to… a-avoid casualties. How could we make the men fight another war… when they've just returned from a long campaign?"

Hearing the tremor in her voice, Ruth's expression grew troubled as though he were worried she would burst into tears.

"With Sir Riftan leading, the war should be over within a month… No, make that half a month," Ruth said reassuringly. "The duke's knights may number almost three times ours, but the Remdragon Knights' prowess in battle is at least ten times greater. The reason

why they have yet to declare war on us is because they know it's a battle they cannot win."

He then shrugged and mumbled, "Though it would have been better if they had declared war first."

"I-If the duke is not likely to retaliate…" Maxi blurted, "isn't that more reason not to go to w-war? I will… t-try to persuade Riftan, so… p-please talk to the knights, Ruth. If Anatol w-withdraws its declaration, th-then my father will—"

"You should know better than any of us what kind of man the Duke of Croyso is, my lady. He might try to avoid an armed conflict, but he will never overlook such an offense completely. He'll certainly find a way to retaliate. That being the case, it'd be better to settle this in a manner that is more favorable to us. Going up against that man politically would be difficult."

Maxi hunched her shoulders. Cold sweat prickled her back as she recalled her father's bloodied figure limp on the floor. Indeed, he would never overlook such an affront. After quietly gnawing her lip, Maxi nodded with a stiff expression.

"I understand w-what you mean. Thank you… for explaining all this to me."

Having ended the conversation so decidedly, Maxi rose from her seat. Ruth gave her a grim look.

"My lady, there is nothing you can do. Please don't pursue any foolhardy endeavors."

Stung, Maxi pretended not to understand. "W-Whatever do you mean?"

Ruth narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. "I mean, give up the notion of writing to your father to sway him. We both know no amount of persuasion from you will change his mind, nor is Sir Riftan likely to change his. The blows have been dealt. It's unlikely that any interference from you will get the two lords to set aside their animosity. I'm afraid conflict is unavoidable."

Feeling as though Ruth had seen right through her, Maxi's face flushed crimson.

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"W-What's the harm in trying? E-Even my father must know… th-that a conflict with the Remdragon Knights would be to his disadvantage. If we t-took a step back… and offered him terms h-he'd be willing to negotiate—"

"I'm afraid we're past the stage for negotiations now, my lady. You must be aware of this yourself," Ruth muttered grimly.

Unable to think of a retort, Maxi bunched her skirt in her fists. The Duke of Croyso was a man who valued his reputation and the prestige of his family name above everything else. Never before had he experienced the humiliation of being beaten bloody and crawling on the floor. Nothing they could offer would quell his outrage.

Maxi was certain of this. She hugged her cold forearms as she trembled in the hopelessness of it all.

Ruth quietly regarded her for a moment. "Don't you want to make the duke pay for what he did to you? He may be your father, but… that doesn't pardon his atrocious actions."

Maxi's face blanched at the unexpected question. She looked at Ruth, shame etched across her features, before casting her eyes to the floor.

"I-I… don't care what happens to that man," she muttered coldly. "I just… don't want Riftan and the others… to go off to war again."

"Those men have lived all their lives on the battlefield, and they will continue to do so. You won't last if you get worked up every time."

Maxi clenched her jaw. Ruth's gaze lingered on her before heaving a sigh.

"I understand your sentiments, my lady, but I pray you will stand by Sir Riftan's decision this once."

Maxi begrudgingly nodded. No matter how much she racked her brain, she could not think of a way to get her father to change his

mind, nor the words to persuade Riftan. She was dejectedly biting her lip when Ludis entered the room with a tray of steaming herbal tea. It was unfortunate that neither of them were in the mood for it.

Maxi excused herself and returned to her room. She had been so tense during the exchange that she felt drained the moment she sat on her bed. Flopping onto the sheets, she tried to recall the faces of her father's vassal knights. None of them would be a match for Riftan. That was what she mumbled to herself in an attempt to assuage her fears, but it proved ineffective. Rubbing her throbbing temples, Maxi closed her eyes.

The war preparations began in earnest. Maxi often saw mercenaries and knights doing drills together in the training grounds, and she occasionally spotted carts loaded with weapons and cannonballs rolling into the castle.

She was forced to turn a blind eye to it all. Though a torrent of words hounded her whenever she saw Riftan's face, she could not find the right ones to say aloud.

Should I apologize for causing this war? Or do I insist that I have no desire for revenge?

With no idea of what to say, Maxi gave him the cold shoulder on more than one occasion. There was no doubt that Riftan would have sensed the anxiousness that shrouded her, but still he refused to tell her anything.

His behavior was the main reason behind her despondence. He was always unduly courteous and cautious around her, and it made her fear that he no longer felt the passion he once had. And though he tended to her more attentively than ever, it felt closer to a father looking after a child than a husband caring for his wife.

What was more, Riftan had yet to tell her about the war himself. Was he afraid that she would collapse from shock? Lost in her thoughts, Maxi stared out the window.

The garden bustled with laborers busily preparing for winter and sentries transporting provisions. Upon Maxi's orders, Ludis had made inquiries and had found out that all the war preparations would be

over in three to four days' time. After which, Riftan would advance on the Duke of Croyso with four hundred mounted troops.

Maxi forced herself to banish the horrors of war from her mind and turned away from the window. Ludis, who was sewing by the fireplace, saw Maxi's dark expression and crinkled her face in concern.

"My lady, shall I bring you something to eat?"

"N-No, I had too much at lunch. I have no appetite."

"Then how about a warm cup of—"

"I-I said I'm fine."

Hearing the irritation in her master's voice, Ludis closed her mouth. Maxi felt sudden remorse at being snappy for no reason.

"I-I will… let you know if I do," she said, her face turning red. "I truly… don't have an appetite for anything at the moment."

Ludis gave her a small smile to indicate that she did not mind and returned to her sewing. Feeling like an overanxious child, Maxi began pacing around her chambers. That was how she passed the afternoon until the blare of a kopel sounded outside.

Maxi's head jerked up. Two long blasts. That meant that someone of high status had come to the castle. She hurried over to the window to see a group of about forty envoys carrying the banner of the royal family. Cold sweat trickled down her back as she watched them enter the gates. Had the king sent a mediator as everyone had expected?

"L-Ludis… please help me get ready. W-We have guests."

Maxi was in such a hurry that she almost stumbled over a bump in the carpet. Ludis steadied her and helped her to the stool in front of the mirror. When she was seated, the maidservant skilfully rolled Maxi's curls into a hairnet in the blink of an eye. Ludis then heated a clothing iron, which looked like a rod with a flat, iron plate at the end, and smoothed the wrinkles on Maxi's dress.

After meticulously assessing herself in front of the mirror, Maxi draped a velvet cloak over her shoulders and hurried out of the room. Through the railing, she spotted Riftan and the knights greeting the guests on the floor below. The tight tension surrounding both parties made her freeze.

Princess Agnes stepped out from the royal retinue that filed into the hall. Relief washed over Maxi; at least one of the royal envoys was someone who held Riftan in goodwill. When the princess began speaking, however, Maxi's relief dissipated at her grave tone.

"I have undertaken this long journey in all haste to bring you His Majesty's message. I hope you will forgive me for coming unannounced."

Riftan regarded the princess coldly before turning away. "If the message is so urgent, I assume it cannot wait until you've rested. Please, follow me. Rodrigo, take Her Highness's guards somewhere they can rest."

As Riftan began climbing the stairs, the princess, the two knights flanking her, and four opulently dressed attendants followed.

Maxi reflexively hid behind a pillar, intimidated by the hostile atmosphere. Could she intrude on their conversation when it was so fraught with tension? Not knowing what to do, Maxi hesitated for a while before making her way toward the drawing room. She did not wish to return to her chambers where she would be all alone, tormented with anxiety. And frankly, was she not the main reason all of this was happening?

Mustering her courage, she approached the arched mahogany door. The knights and the veiled attendants standing outside threw glances at her. Maxi paused and was about to greet them when she heard the princess's icy voice from inside the room.

"His Majesty has made it very clear that he will not condone a war."

Maxi flinched and froze to the spot. Riftan's furious voice followed.

"The crown has no right to interfere in this matter. You have failed to keep your word to protect my wife, so what right do you have to deny me?!"

"Please remember whom you are addressing!"

The heated exchange carried on before everything went quiet. The princess's heavy voice finally broke the silence.

"I have no excuse for my failure, but that's a personal debt I must repay. I come to you now not as Agnes Reuben but as the king's messenger. I ask that you show me due respect."

Riftan said something in a low tone that was practically a mumble, and Maxi could not make it out. The frigid tension behind the door had her scared stiff. She found herself neither able to enter nor walk away. Cold sweat prickled her back as she stood rooted to the spot.

Once again, the princess's tight voice came through the door.

"His Majesty does not want to jeopardize the stability of Wedon. I'm sure you're well aware of the Duchy of Croyso's territorial dispute with Dristan. If the duke were to lose a significant number of his men in a war with Anatol, Dristan would never let the opportunity slip through its fingers. They will attempt to reclaim the eastern part of the duke's territory, which will be a heavy loss for Wedon."

"Stop your exaggerations! Plundering another territory is a clear violation of the armistice. Dristan would never dare openly disregard it."

"Dristan has reasonable grounds for it. The eastern parts originally belonged to their kingdom. The lands should have been returned after the treaty, but the duke asserted his claim when he married a Roemian princess. If Dristan points to that as their reason, even Osiriya won't be able to intervene."

Maxi stiffened at the gravity in the princess's voice. She sounded even more somber as she continued.

"The balance of power among the kingdoms is the only thing sustaining the armistice. If that balance breaks, no treaty will hold any sway. It could collapse all order in the Seven Kingdoms."

"There have been disputes between the kingdoms for all kinds of reasons even *with* the armistice. If one war is enough to dissolve it, then it would've collapsed a long time ago!"

"Have I not just explained to you that any conflict between Anatol and Croyso won't end with one war? We simply cannot allow anything that would weaken Wedon's power and give Dristan the opportunity to invade. If you insist on going against His Majesty's orders, he intends to ask Osiriya for reinforcements to stop Anatol."

Maxi gasped. The king's reaction was far more serious than she had expected. She felt a chill deep in her bones. The tension oozing

from the other side of the door was almost palpable. After a moment of silence, the princess spoke again in a much calmer tone.

"That is how gravely the royal family regard this matter. I pray that you will not force us to take such extreme measures."

"Is that a threat?"

"It is a request. The mantle of Rosem Wigrew's reincarnation is bestowed only on those who have greatly contributed to the peace of the Western Continent. I ask that you rescind your declaration of war, at the very least so as not to sully that title."

A thud sounded behind the door as if in rebuttal.

"Why would I care about a title I never wanted?" Riftan snarled. "If Dristan tries to invade, I will consider it my responsibility to drive them out. The king may do whatever he wants, but he won't be able to stop me this time."

Maxi could not stand by and listen anymore. She was reaching for the handle when a slim hand as pale as white jade blocked her. Startled, she looked up to see one of the princess's attendants next to her. The attendant regarded Maxi through her veil before opening the door.

Riftan's fierce gaze flew straight to the attendant as she strode into the room. Unfazed, she strode over to him and removed her veil.

Riftan's eyes widened. "What are you doing here…?"

"I asked Her Highness to bring me along as one of her attendants. I thought I would have to step in if she failed to persuade you."

The delicately beautiful voice was one Maxi had spent years listening to. Could it be…? Maxi began to doubt her ears.

"Coming here was a great risk on my part. I have come counting on your honor as a knight, so I trust you will not harm me."

Hebaron, who had been quietly standing next to Riftan, scowled and interjected. "You offend us. We would never do anything as cowardly as taking an innocent woman hostage."

Ignoring the knight's interruption, Rosetta haughtily regarded Riftan.

"I believe, sir, that you owe me a debt. Is that not so?"

“Are you asking me to repay you by rescinding my declaration of war?” said Riftan, his voice growing dangerously low.

Despite the intimidating aura rolling off him, Rosetta refused to back down. She scoffed and looked toward Maxi.

“What else do you have to offer me?”

Maxi’s eyes widened as she met Rosetta’s turquoise gaze. She could not process what was happening.

With a condescending smile curled on her lips, Rosetta said, “Of course, you may ignore my request if you don’t agree that you are indebted to me. If you consider my help inconsequential, by all means, pay me no mind and invade my home. How could I protest if you regard executing your will more important than the debt you owe?”

Riftan followed Rosetta’s gaze and locked on Maxi, his face hardening. Maxi took a step back. A suffocating silence fell over the room. Rosetta seemed to be testing Riftan as she fixed her eyes on him, while Princess Agnes maintained the silent pressure.

Riftan had his jaws clenched throughout this exchange. After a while, he swore under his breath and glared at Rosetta.

“The debt I owe is great…” he said through gritted teeth. “Fine. I will withdraw Anatol’s declaration of war.”

Chapter 178

Relieved sighs burst forth all around the room. They were cut short as Riftan promptly added, "But it's a different story if the duke refuses to let go. I will only back down this once. If the duke strikes first, I *will* retaliate."

"You needn't worry about that," said the princess. "His Majesty will not tolerate anyone disrupting the current order, and that applies to the Duke of Croyso too. The king does not want his vassals sowing further discord. We have made this clear to the duke as well."

For a fleeting moment, a feral smile crossed Riftan's face. "And was he willing to obey?"

Princess Agnes nodded solemnly. "The duke does not wish to sour his relationship with the royal family. If Anatol pulls back, we will intervene if he tries to cause another dispute."

Riftan looked far from reassured. His lips twisted in a regretful expression, and he shot to his feet. He strode over to Maxi, who had been frozen in place by the mind-boggling exchange, and pulled her arm as he addressed the princess.

"Seeing as you've achieved what you wanted, I see no reason for you to remain here any longer. You may leave now."

It was a blatant dismissal of the king's envoys.

Maxi looked up at Riftan with a flustered expression. "R-Riftan…"

The princess's reply was tinged with bitterness. "We'll leave as soon as our horses are rested enough for the return journey. I hope you won't mind us intruding on your hospitality a little longer."

Riftan shot her a glare before turning and marching down the corridor. Maxi did not get the chance to get in a word as Riftan led her up the stairs. Just then, she heard Rosetta call out behind them.

"Wait."

Riftan paused before the stairs.

"I wish to speak with my sister before I leave," said Rosetta, gliding over to them.

Maxi's face grew still. What did they have to talk about? Rosetta approached at her usual languid pace, but it felt as threatening as though she intended to crush Maxi.

Sensing Maxi's uneasiness, Riftan blocked Rosetta's path. "And what exactly do you have to discuss with her?"

"It's just a sisterly chat." Rosetta raised her chin tauntingly. "Are you worried that I might harm her? You don't need to be. I wish to leave this castle unscathed."

Heat rose in Maxi's cheeks at Rosetta's mocking tone. The embarrassment of hiding behind Riftan out of fear of her younger sister pricked at her. She tugged on his sleeve to dissuade him and took a tentative step forward.

"I-I… wish to speak with her too."

Riftan's lips thinned in discontent.

Maxi hastily added, "D-Don't worry. Rosetta…"

No words came to mind as she went to reassure him. Maxi looked at her sister as though she were seeing her for the first time. Except for Rosetta's conceited way of talking, what else did she know about her sister?

At Maxi's hesitation, Rosetta said primly, "Won't you show me your garden? I find it rather stifling in here."

Her eyes scanned the hallway. Though Maxi felt offended, she forced a smile on her lips and nodded. Riftan went to say something before stopping himself and reluctantly letting go of her hand.

"Don't stay out too long. The wind is cold," he mumbled gloomily.

The icy look he directed at Rosetta seemed to warn her of the consequences that awaited if she were to do anything foolish. Rosetta, however, remained unperturbed. Maxi shot Riftan a reassuring smile and descended the stairs with her sister.

Outside, the harsh autumn sunlight stung her eyes. Rosetta's light brown hair shimmered faintly silver in Maxi's blurred vision. Even in her modest attire, Rosetta was as beautiful as an angel. Maxi was unconsciously intimidated by her sister's beauty.

Throwing a glance at the knights behind them, Rosetta whispered to Maxi, "I want to talk to you privately."

Maxi regarded her sister warily before turning to address Sir Elliot. "S-Sir Elliot… I need a moment with my sister."

The knight looked guarded as he glanced at Rosetta. "We'll wait for you up here, my lady," he said, nodding. "Please call us if you need anything."

When the knights backed away, the two women climbed down the steps to the garden, awash with golden hues. Rosetta remained quiet for a long time even as the knights grew distant. What was it about this mysterious topic that made her hold back? Maxi grew tense. It was only as they reached a corner of the garden that Rosetta finally spoke.

"The Croyso knights found our father immediately after you left. He was treated before it was too late, and I'm told he will be just fine."

Maxi's whole body grew rigid as Rosetta's lips curled into a wicked smile.

"But I think they may have set his broken jawbone incorrectly, as he has trouble articulating his words now. The damage might be permanent."

Seeing the evident pleasure on Rosetta's face sent Maxi's head reeling in confusion. Backing away, she regarded her sister as though she were a stranger.

"I-I… don't know… what you're getting at."

"But of course. You've never really tried to get to know me after all."

Maxi recoiled at Rosetta's biting tone.

All traces of a smile vanishing from her face, Rosetta said flatly, "Don't take it the wrong way. I don't resent you for never showing any interest in me. I didn't ask for your time to whine about something so childish."

"Th-Then why…?"

Rosetta remained silent for a moment before saying calmly, "I think Father is secretly communicating with the other nobles. He undoubtedly has no intention of overlooking this matter."

Maxi felt the blood drain from her face. A gust of arid wind swept past. She hugged her forearms as they broke out in goosebumps.

"W-Why? What on earth i-is he…?"

"I don't know the details. The beating must have been quite a shock. He confined himself in his room for a while, but then he began calling for his vassals to take letters all over Wedon. He might be pretending to obey the royal commands, but I think he's secretly planning something. I'm sure he intends to carry it out once I'm married into the royal family."

Her lips twisted in irritation, but her face quickly regained its usual indifference as though none of this really mattered to her.

"I'm simply letting you know. When the time is right, you should warn your husband to be prepared."

"W-Why… didn't you speak of this b-before? If you had—"

"Your husband would not have acquiesced. After all, it would be more expedient for him to deal with our father with force at the outset," Rosetta replied coldly. "But I don't want a war to send our kingdom into turmoil. Even I have a person or two I wish to protect."

"I-I also don't want a war… but…"

Maxi forced a gulp. Although it was the truth, she hated the thought of Riftan being caught in a difficult situation even more.

Rosetta watched Maxi's ashen face with a bemused expression. "Do you love him?"

Her uncharacteristic sentiment momentarily stupefied Maxi. She could not fathom Rosetta's intentions in asking such a question. When she remained silent, Rosetta gave her a spiteful smile.

"It won't work out. It's beyond your capabilities."

The certainty in her sister's remark made something lurch in her chest. It was no mystery that Rosetta thought little of her, but her blatant expression of it made Maxi's blood boil.

Her face flushing in anger, Maxi raised her voice and said, "R-Riftan… ch-cherishes me. For a long time now, h-he has—"

"I didn't say he was the problem. You are. You will never be able to love another person."

Rosetta's retort was cruelly calm. As though pricked by a thorn, Maxi's hand flinched.

"A-And what makes you think…" she said, shaking her head to say that she found the accusation absurd, "you know me well enough to say those things? You know… nothing about me. You said that I n-never bothered to get to know you, but the same g-goes for y—"

"But I do know you."

Rosetta's conviction temporarily left Maxi speechless. They had never been close. She could not fathom the reason behind her sister's certainty.

Regardless, Rosetta continued in her detached manner, "I am probably the only person in the world who understands you."

"S-Stop this nonsense."

Maxi bristled at her sister's arrogance. Her face crumpling in anger, she retorted, "Y-You? U-Understand me? How c-could you… when you've been showered with… p-praise and affection… all your life? No, you know nothing—"

"Affection?" Rosetta's face twisted coldly. "Do you truly think that Father is capable of loving another soul?"

"H-He has always been p-proud—"

"Father considered me useful. He did not love me."

"You, at least—"

Maxi pressed her lips together. She could not bring herself to finish the sentence.

With a disdainful scoff, Rosetta said, "Yes. Unlike you, I was never beaten."

The contempt in her voice made Maxi's face burn. Yet, Rosetta did not laugh at her expense. After gazing down at the dried grass on the flowerbed with a forlorn expression, Rosetta said wryly, "The year I turned ten, Father made me watch as he whipped you."

Maxi was stunned.

"Th-That's not possible. H-He never struck me… w-with you in the room."

"The room with the mirror… had a small partition on one side. Father opened it… and made me watch."

It felt like all the air in her lungs had been squeezed out. Her sister had seen her being beaten like a beast. Maxi covered her mouth with a trembling hand, humiliation washing over her. Though

she had assumed that Rosetta undoubtedly knew of their father's treatment of her, she had never once thought that her sister would have personally witnessed her crawling on the floor.

Rosetta watched with a vacant expression as Maxi staggered from the shock.

"Father wanted to show me the fate that awaited those he deemed useless. He called me to the adjacent room whenever you were punished. And as he intended, watching you being whipped like an animal terrified me. I had nightmares every night. I thought that I would get the same beating if I failed to be perfect. That next time, it could be me being summoned to that room. Father had no purpose for useless beings. I… made every effort to meet his expectations. I never once let my guard down."

Her lips twisted into a strange smile. "In retrospect, he might have punished you more harshly to set an example for me. So I would never dare to disobey or rebel against him…"

Maxi racked her brain to remember a ten-year-old Rosetta, but her memories felt shrouded in mist. The image imprinted in her mind was of a perpetually beautiful, perfect, and haughty Rosetta.

And yet, Rosetta had also been a defenseless child desperately trying to protect herself. The moment the realization hit, Maxi was able to see her sister as clearly as though a veil had lifted. The delicate frame, the forlorn eyes… Standing before her was a young girl three months shy of nineteen.

"I have witnessed all the torment you were made to suffer. I know how your spirit was crushed… I know how powerless women are, and how cruel and heartless men can be…"

Her sister's voice felt like a faraway echo. After glancing up at the sky, Rosetta lowered her gaze once more.

"I know I'll never be able to truly love someone, nor will I be able to trust completely. It would be impossible even if I wanted to. Something in my heart prevents it, like it's broken. I doubt, test, and eventually push away all who approach me. If I'm like this… how much worse must it be for you?"

"I-I…"

Maxi staggered as if she had been forced into a corner. She looked down at the floor as her face crumpled. Their shadows stretched out from their feet, tall and scraggy, like dead trees. A chill crawled down her spine.

Rosetta spoke again, this time with the graveness of delivering a prophecy. “It can never work out. Your relationship will eventually fall apart.”

“Y-You’re wrong. I am… different from you.”

Her words sounded unsure even to her own ears.

“You were unable to trust that man when it truly mattered,” Rosetta blandly pointed out, “and you will continue to do so. Whenever your heart grows weak, you will be plagued with doubts. We are twisted that way.”

“I-I…”

A needle-like sting scratched at Maxi’s throat. Resistance to the future her sister painted came surging up from the depths of her heart, and she clutched at her skirt.

“I-I am… going to change.”

She spoke with conviction as if to pour out and lay bare this feeling inside her. Rosetta’s gloomy eyes told her that she thought it was an impossible feat.

Maxi squeezed her eyes shut. “I am going to change!”

A fierce gust blew past, rustling the dried leaves still clinging to the trees.

After quietly watching the shaking branches, Rosetta muttered skeptically, “Then I wish you luck.”

Chapter 179

Maxi and Rosetta returned to the great hall where the delegation was already making preparations to leave. Seeing their guests, who had traveled a great distance, being forced back on the road without proper rest made Maxi feel terrible.

Ignoring Riftan's insistence that she should not mind them, Maxi went out to the castle gate with the servants to see them off. She was upset at the princess for threatening Riftan, but that did not mean she could throw the royal delegation out so coldly.

"You don't have to look so apologetic," said Princess Agnes. "We were planning on leaving immediately anyway. We intend to stay a night in Earl Loverne's estate, then proceed to Croyso Castle. We should let the duke know that Riftan has withdrawn his declaration of war as soon as possible."

A faint smile tugged at the princess's lips as she gazed down at a clearly uncomfortable Maxi.

"I don't know what happened, but the duke must have made a grave mistake for Riftan to be like this. I hope you'll forgive me for not being able to take Anatol's side."

Maxi cast her eyes down and muttered stiffly, "Y-You need not apologize, Your Highness. I understand… the royal family's stance."

Though she was disappointed by the princess's businesslike manner, in the end, it was entirely Maxi's own fault that things had come to this. If she had not followed her father that day, there would have been no reason for the princess to travel all over Wedon to act as mediator. Maxi was so guilt-ridden that she could not look up.

"Please… b-be careful. I wish you… a safe journey."

"Thank you for seeing us off. I was…" The ever-dignified princess hesitated before continuing awkwardly, "…reassured when I saw you

in good health today. I know there is much I need to apologize to you for."

"N-Not at all, Your Highness."

Flustered, Maxi waved her hands. The princess adamantly shook her head.

"I'm afraid I've been thoughtless. I'm sorry you had to find out in the worst possible way. But the duke was wrong when he said everyone in Drachium Castle was talking about it. That man blew it out of proportion."

Maxi stiffened when she realized that the princess was referring to the gossip surrounding Maxi's miscarriage.

"Of course," Princess Agnes added quickly, "I'm not trying to defend the king's actions. He shouldn't have used the issue to mock the duke. That was not right. Please allow me to apologize on His Majesty's behalf. If you ever need my help, do not hesitate to let me know."

After dumbly staring at the princess's solemn face, Maxi turned her gaze to Rosetta. Her sister had her back to them as though uninterested in listening to their conversation. Should she inform the princess of her father's plans now? After briefly debating the matter in her head, Maxi cautiously opened her mouth.

"If, in the future… th-the Duke of Croyso… tries to threaten Anatol… p-please intervene as earnestly as you have today. I ask… only that."

The princess must not have thought that Maxi would so publicly take Riftan's side. She looked a little surprised before giving Maxi a resolute nod.

"You needn't worry about that. If the king does not take action, I will take it upon myself to stop him."

Maxi grew solemn. "Th-Then it's true… that His Majesty is more partial… to the Duke of Croyo than to Riftan."

The princess faltered before making the admission.

"If I'm being honest, then yes, that is the case. His Majesty wishes to keep Riftan close, but only so he can flaunt his reincarnation of Rosem Wigrew to the other kingdoms. Since war is currently prohibited by the Armistice of the Seven Kingdoms, the power of the

Remdragon Knights serves no purpose other than exterminating monsters and settling disputes."

Maxi's face fell at the princess's impersonal statement. Before she could say anything, however, Princess Agnes began speaking again.

"But the tables will turn in a couple of years. Anatol has expanded so much since last spring that it's practically unrecognizable. If it continues to flourish at this rate, it'll soon be the biggest trade city connecting the Western Continent to the South. Even the Duke of Croyso or the royal family would have to think twice before offending Anatol."

"B-Be that as it may… you're saying that is not the case at present."

A bitter smile formed on the princess's lips at Maxi's barbed retort.

"His Majesty will change his opinion. As soon as I return to Drachium Palace, I shall inform him of how valuable Anatol has become."

Maxi suppressed a sigh. It would be useless to expect anything more from the princess. She was, after all, a member of the royal family. She could turn her back on Riftan at any moment if he were ever to threaten their interests.

An odd sense of disappointment engulfed her as she watched the delegation leave. Though she was relieved that war had been averted, thinking of what was to come made it difficult to be completely at ease.

Maxi trudged into the great hall and crossed paths with Rodrigo who was descending the stairs with an armful of linen. He rushed over as soon as he spotted her.

"You mustn't move around so much, my lady. You've only just regained your health. His lordship has made it clear that I am to immediately escort you back to your room upon your return."

Unable to argue against the steward's insistence, Maxi made her way toward the staircase and glanced about.

"I-Is Riftan… in our chambers?"

"His lordship has gone to the training grounds with the knights."

Maxi peered out the window. Even though he had rescinded his declaration of war, there would still be countless matters that

required his attention. Maxi returned to her room and anxiously waited for Riftan to return.

As she paced about, she could not stop thinking about what Rosetta had said to her. It was possible that her sister had meant those words for herself. Had she also felt the despair of not being able to trust anyone, no matter how much she wanted to? The thought made Maxi anxious. Could she truly change when someone as beautiful and clever as Rosetta had failed?

Maxi walked over to the mirror and gazed into her gray eyes. Even she had to admit, she did not hold much hope for the anxious woman standing before her. She absentmindedly touched her cheek before going to lie on her bed, exhausted.

The room was dark when she sluggishly opened her eyes again. She must have fallen asleep. Rubbing her face, Maxi glanced at the empty spot next to her. There was no sign that Riftan had come back.

Maxi frowned. Had he ever left her alone this long since they had been back at Calypse Castle?

Gnawing her lip, she got out of bed and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. Servants were lighting the sconces in the corridor just outside.

She ran over to them. "H-His lordship is not back yet… Is he still at the training grounds?"

One of the servants respectfully bowed his head and said, "His lordship is currently in the council room, my lady. He informed us that he would be retiring in the adjacent chambers tonight as he was busy. I've just come back from stocking the room with firewood."

Maxi glanced around uneasily. Even when they had been busy preparing for battle, Riftan had always returned to their bedchamber at night. Had calling off this war been that difficult?

The servants nervously studied her face. Maxi offered them a smile and turned around. She did not want to return to her room, where she would have to stay up all night alone. After a moment's hesitation, she made her way up the dark staircase. Two floors

above, she saw light streaming from the room at the end of the corridor.

She hovered near the door for a while before tentatively pushing it open. Inside, she found Riftan sitting on a bed sipping a goblet of wine.

"Why are you still up?" he said, his gaze fierce.

Slightly intimidated by his surliness, Maxi mumbled, "I-I was waiting for you…"

Riftan took a gulp from the goblet in silence.

Maxi slowly closed the door behind her and walked over. "A-Are you… quite busy?"

"I had to send messengers across the kingdom to explain the change of circumstances to the mercenaries we hired. Quite the exhausting endeavor."

He filled his goblet again and continued, "We can't let our guard down just yet, so I've decided to maintain our military organization. You'll see mercenaries entering and leaving the castle for a while. I'll make it so that they avoid the great hall as much as possible, but you might end up encountering some. They're crude company, so try not to interact with them. And I don't want you roaming about the castle on your own like this."

"I-I'll be careful," Maxi replied meekly.

She stepped closer to him until their knees were almost touching. Riftan visibly tensed. He clutched his goblet so tightly that Maxi was worried he might crush it.

"You should sleep alone tonight. I still have things I must attend to."

Maxi glanced around the room, but there was not a parchment in sight. She fidgeted with her skirt and asked in a deliberately sarcastic tone, "A-And by things you must attend to… do you mean drinking?"

"I'm asking you to leave me alone."

Riftan slammed his goblet down, making Maxi flinch. Wine sloshed over the rim of the goblet. After staring at the stain on the carpet, Riftan rubbed his forehead and swore.

"I don't want to demean myself further in your eyes. Please, just leave me be."

Maxi stood frozen for a moment before slowly leaning over. Riftan opened his mouth as if to snap at her but did not say anything.

Studying his steely face, Maxi asked cautiously, "D-Demean yourself? How? I… don't understand… why you're so angry…"

"I—" Riftan exclaimed before clenching his jaw. His shoulders shook, and his eyes were like two dark flames.

The intensity of his anger was petrifying. Riftan heaved as though he had something stuck in his throat before letting out a ragged exhale.

"I wanted to make that bastard suffer as much as— No, a hundred times more than the pain he caused you. I just can't get the image of him lashing you out of my head. And you… crying in that godforsaken room…"

A wave of shock went through her as she noticed blood dripping from his clenched fist. She quickly clasped his hand.

Riftan gritted his teeth and snarled, "Ripping that bastard to shreds wouldn't be enough. And yet, pointless concerns like the stability of the kingdom prevent me from doing anything. No matter how much I struggle to climb up, I'm still powerless. I can't even protect you."

"R-Riftan… don't be l-like this," said Maxi, shaking her head.

Using all her strength, she tried to unfurl his fist.

"And they call me the reincarnation of Rosem Wigrew!" he bellowed with a sandpaper raspiness. "If I were anything like the legendary hero, I wouldn't be so powerless."

"Th-That's not true." Cupping his face in her hands, she forced him to look at her. "You… s-saved me."

"I was too late! I was always late! I—"

Maxi dipped her head and gave him a soft kiss. His breath hitched, cutting off his beastly snarling. His hot breath tickled her lips.

Caressing his cheek, Maxi whispered in a quivering voice, "W-When I was young… I prayed every day… for the most g-gallant knight in the world t-to appear… and take me away from my father's

castle. I prayed f-for someone to come… a-and stop him from punishing me…”

When she forced a smile on her lips, Riftan’s eyes grew visibly pained. She stroked his tousled hair and kissed his forehead.

“Y-You… were the answer to my prayers. You are… my hero.”

Riftan’s face was contorted in pain as if he were being tortured. As Maxi pulled him into a comforting embrace, his whole body felt as tense as a taut string about to snap. His large, muscular frame curled in her arms like a helpless child.

Maxi’s heart ached. If only she had been a little tougher, he could have avoided such anguish. At least for his sake, she wanted to change. She would become the strongest and most resilient person she knew.

She lowered her head and kissed his burning nape. Through his chest pressed against hers, she felt the wild pounding of his heart.

Chapter 180

"I'm no hero. I'm not—"

Riftan's voice came out strangled. He stopped when Maxi touched his chest and looked up at her in a daze. She kissed his cheek while her hands dug into his hair that gleamed almost dark blue. As she wound the shaggy lock above his nape around her finger, a tremor coursed through his chiseled torso.

"Maxi… stop…"

She kissed his earlobe, pretending not to hear him. A growl rumbled in his throat. He grabbed her shoulders with trembling hands and pried her off.

"You've done enough."

Maxi's face flushed with embarrassment, and she anxiously looked up at him. "D-Do you not… want me anymore?"

Guilt flashed across Riftan's features. He scrubbed at his face, then swore under his breath. "Do you think… that's possible? I wanted you even when you were at your most frail."

"Then…"

With a sigh of relief, Maxi placed her hand on his forearm. Riftan jerked away from her as though he had been branded with a burning iron. The pain in his eyes was palpable.

"But I don't want to. Don't you understand? It disgusts me that I was no better than a beast in a rut, even as you were lying there wounded!"

He bent to rub his forehead on her hand and inhaled a shaky breath.

"I don't want to make you suffer anymore. I want to protect you. At least once, I want to treat you the way you deserve."

"B-But I'm not suffering."

She lowered herself onto his lap, but he flinched and rose from the bed.

"You have… never done a-anything to hurt me. I like… all that you do. I want to… touch you."

She could see his throat bobbing wildly. Riftan stretched his arms out but stopped himself from embracing her. His hands clenched into fists again. To Maxi's surprise, there was fear on his face.

This man, who had faced terrifying monsters without batting an eye, appeared to be afraid of a woman less than half his size. His jaw strained as he clenched his teeth before he looked away.

"No, I can't. I can't promise that I'll be gentle. I would no doubt take you like a frenzied beast—"

Maxi began undoing his belt and slipping her hands inside his clothes. Riftan inhaled sharply and bunched the blanket in his fist in an attempt to gather his self-control. After hesitating for a moment, Maxi pressed her lips against his slightly parted ones and tentatively pushed her tongue forward.

The tip of his was sweet from the wine. When she gently licked his lips as if to savor the taste, Riftan responded hungrily. Twisting her hair in his fist, he entwined his tongue with hers. Maxi wound her arms around the sides of his feverish neck. Tilting his head, Riftan pushed his tongue deeper and squeezed her breast over her bodice. Maxi felt her blood begin to simmer at all the sensations.

She let out a moan and mirrored his caresses. Even in the dark, she could see Riftan's face burning red. He practically tore off her bodice and sucked on the taut peak of her breast. Maxi shuddered and hugged his head. She could feel her insides melting like candle wax.

Her dress was bunched around her waist; Riftan grabbed it and pulled it down to her feet. He rubbed her damp back with a calloused hand and peppered sultry kisses across her pale abdomen.

Before she knew it, she was lying on the bed, her whole body flushed pink. The swaying shadows cast by the lamplight swept over them.

Maxi yanked his tunic over his head, and he pulled her into his arms in a crushing embrace. She could feel his arousal pressed between her legs. Riftan slowly rubbed himself against her while

raining kisses on her breast and neck. The burning desire now had Maxi clawing at his shoulders.

Riftan jerked away as though finally coming to his senses.

Maxi looked up in bewilderment. His face was crumpled in frustration, and his body shook ever so slightly. Despite this, he summoned his self-control and covered her naked body with the blanket. A stiff smile twisted his lips.

"We should… stop here for today. You've only just gotten better."

Maxi watched in a stupor as Riftan sat up with his back to her and pulled on his trousers. Her initial embarrassment soon gave way to a simmering incredulity and anger. She was tired of him treating her like a debilitated patient.

She yanked his arm as he was trying to pick up the tunic he had thrown on the floor. She had intended to pull him back onto the bed, but their difference in weight made it impossible. Left with no other option, she climbed onto his lap. Riftan sat frozen with a vacant expression as she pressed her swollen lips to his.

He sucked in a quick breath. It was almost laughable how easily his self-control crumbled. A strange sense of triumph filled her as she gazed down at him.

"I-I am… not a child you need to protect. I am… your wife."

For a moment, Riftan looked taken aback before his eyes slowly grew pained. Her delight quickly deflated when she saw the bleakness in them.

His chiseled features contorted, and he said in a low mutter, "And? What do you intend to do now?"

"Wh-What else?"

Maxi's heart fluttered. She had naively hoped that he would take the lead from there. Riftan's eyes roamed over her face, bare chest, and abdomen before he squeezed them shut. Creases lined his forehead.

Her confidence perked up at his reaction, and she placed her hand on his chest. His heart was beating so wildly that she was afraid it might burst.

"Y-You said i-it was… natural for married couples to do these things," she murmured, kissing the tip of his chin and sliding her

hand from his lean collarbone to his abdomen.

A pained groan escaped his lips.

"Just kill me."

Her hand twitched at the genuine pain in his voice. He pressed his fists into his eyes. Though he said he was holding back out of worry for her, it was possible that he simply did not want to. Maxi slowly pulled away.

"If you… don't like this… I'll stop."

His eyes snapped open, and he looked up at her resentfully as if she had scorned him. She hesitated, unsure of what to do next. Riftan remained silent for a long moment.

"I don't have the confidence to be gentle."

He sounded deflated.

"You'll have to do it yourself."

Mortified, Maxi glanced about before stammering, "T-Teach me… what to do…"

She saw his hands trembling as he lowered his trousers. He then hoisted her onto his lap.

"Spread your legs. Yes… sit lower… just like that…"

Maxi positioned herself on top and slowly took him in. She was so tight that it felt a little uncomfortable. When she rested her hands on his abdomen and froze, Riftan twitched and bit his lip. His whole body burned red like heated copper as he tried to restrain himself.

"Does it hurt?" he said in a raspy voice.

It had been a while since she had last received him, and Maxi shook her head against the pain. He reached out to touch her before clenching his fist until his knuckles turned white. He clutched at the blanket.

"Try moving a little. But… only as you want… *Nghh*…"

As she began to slide languidly up and down, Riftan threw his head back into the pillow and yanked at the blanket. He was like a lion struggling against its chains.

Maxi watched his face with glazed eyes as she slowly took him to the hilt before going up again. The pain disappeared as she maintained the rhythm, and sensual pleasure began to build inside her.

Again and again, she tightened around him. Riftan moaned as though she were killing him. His body was slick with sweat, and his breathing grew ragged. Maxi could not believe that the strongest man in the world was so helplessly surrendering himself beneath her.

Though his need seemed to be growing keener the more she moved, he kept a tight grip on his self-control. Maxi tried to move faster but found it was not that easy.

She was soon at her limits. The place where they merged throbbed, and a convulsion erupted within her. Even so, a part of her was not satisfied. Splayed out on his chest, she longingly rubbed herself against him.

"R-Riftan… help me."

He gulped, then wrapped his arms around her waist and began to move deeper and faster inside her. Maxi desperately clung to him as her vision went white.

Sharp pleasure shot up her spine whenever he thrust into her. She pressed her forehead on his shoulder and cried out. His hands hungrily roamed over her shoulders, back, and neck. He seemed unable to stop himself.

He mumbled something unintelligible before moving faster like a stallion freed from its reins. Maxi writhed, and her toes curled. Finally, an intense climax tore through her. Riftan's arms tightened around her convulsing body.

How wonderful would it be if we could be merged as one like this forever?

That was Maxi's last thought before she closed her eyes.

She awoke to the sound of pouring rain. Her eyes fluttered open to take in the unfamiliar room and the wavering shadows on the walls. For a brief moment, she blinked in confusion before looking up at the hand stroking her hair. Riftan sat next to her staring out the window with his back against the wall.

Maxi gazed blankly up at him and realized that she was using his legs as a pillow. When she tried to sit up, Riftan nudged her head back onto his lap.

"Lie still."

He twiddled with her earlobe, then ran his fingers through her disheveled hair. Maxi hunched her shoulders against the tickling sensation.

Looking worried, Riftan adjusted the sheet that had slipped down. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Y-Yes."

"I tried to hold back till the end, but you made it extremely difficult."

Only then did it occur to Maxi that she may have been too bold. Hiding her flushed face beneath her messy hair, she tried to change the subject.

"I-It seems to be raining."

Riftan watched the raindrops pelting the window as he answered. "It's the autumn rain. The temperature will drop once it stops."

Flicking a glance at his dark expression, she cautiously reached for his hand resting on his knee. He stiffened as she interlaced his long fingers with her own.

"D-Don't be so angry anymore," she murmured as she brushed his rugged knuckles and calluses. "To be honest… I'm happy that you won't have to go to war."

"Don't you despise that man?"

Maxi's face fell. Fear was the first emotion that came to her when she thought of her father. It was a bone-deep terror that ate away at her before giving way to helplessness and shame. Perhaps, under all those emotions, one would find resentment and hate. Nevertheless, the fear was so intense that hatred did not even have a chance to come through.

Fidgeting, Maxi replied hollowly, "I-I don't… want to think about that man."

Silence settled over them. For a long moment, the only sounds came from the crackling fire and pouring rain. Riftan spoke first.

"You never looked happy," he said, gazing down at her with somber eyes. "I even considered entering the castle by stealth and kidnapping you."

His lips twisted into a self-deprecating smile.

"But right after I had the thought, I noticed all the opulence. I asked myself how I could possibly make you happy when even living in such a beautiful world could not."

Maxi looked nervously to the side, and Riftan's smile grew rueful.

"I should've carried you away sooner, and not let those thoughts stop me."

"That… w-would have been wonderful."

Riftan's smile faded at her ready agreement. His eyes had a faraway look as he gazed back at her.

He turned back to the window. "You would have fainted from shock. You detested me back then."

"I-I never detested you. I was… afraid of you. Haven't I already t-told you this?"

"In my eyes, it seemed like you hated me."

Growing angry, Maxi glowered at him. "W-Well, in my eyes—"

She pursed her lips. Riftan wound a lock of her hair around his finger and waited for her to finish.

After a moment's hesitation, Maxi spat out, "I-In my eyes… you seemed to hate me too."

Chapter 181

Riftan's fingers froze. Still lying on his lap, Maxi stared up at him as he watched the raindrops spatter the window. He seemed to be avoiding her gaze.

"I was nervous," he said bluntly. "Croyso Castle was not the most comfortable place for me."

Maxi blinked. Even as a low-ranking knight, Riftan had appeared more imposing and confident than any nobleman. Although his manner had lacked refinement, the air of aloofness that always shrouded him suggested he did not care for the opinions of others.

Maxi pursed her lips. "Y-You lie. How could a nervous person… be so haughty?"

"Was I haughty?" he asked, furrowing his brow.

Tilting her chin high, Maxi summoned the most arrogant expression she could. "You used to look at people like this… w-whenever someone spoke to you."

"I had no idea I looked so adorable," said Riftan, chuckling.

He lowered his head to plant a kiss on her pursed lips. Maxi frowned as she brushed away his hair that pricked her eyes.

"And… you used to… scowl and glare at me… whenever our eyes met. It was quite terrifying…"

"I suppose my grim appearance is to blame," he said flatly. "I was simply looking at you."

He then squashed her swollen cheeks, making her look like a flattened pufferfish. Her face flushing, Maxi irritably pushed his hands away. His evasive manner seemed to trigger something, and it felt like she bristled with thorns.

She glared at him, her eyes full of distrust. "N-No. You seemed to be angry at something. Th-That's why… it sometimes… made me wonder if you d-disliked me."

His smile vanished, and his black eyes clouded over like he was trying to conceal his true feelings. Maxi anxiously studied his face.

He drew his lips into a bitter smile as he muttered, "I thought you hated me. You tensed up whenever I approached, and you looked terrified whenever I tried to talk to you. I felt like a horrifying monster."

He clutched a lock of her hair that was strewn over her shoulder and brought it to his lips.

"It began to vex me after a while, so I decided to hate you as well. I wanted to get you out of my head so I could be at peace again."

Maxi was momentarily speechless. She tried to recall the first time she had seen him and wondered how long she had been in his thoughts. Looking back, she saw him entering the castle with the other knights dispatched by the royal family to settle a dispute between the duchy and Drachium.

Even in the midst of hundreds of knights, he had been the center of attention. Maidservants had vied for the chance to attend to him, and even the noblewomen invited to the banquets had been unable to pry their eyes away. Maxi, on the other hand, had found it difficult to understand all the fuss over someone who seemed so cold.

Riftan was right — her first impression of him was what had caused her to freeze whenever he looked at her. She would never have thought that anyone would be attracted to her, and Riftan was a man extremely adept at hiding his emotions.

After a hesitant pause, she reached out to caress his bronze cheek. "Is that why… you came to d-dislike me?"

"Yes."

Her fingers twitched at his curt answer. She pulled back, but Riftan caught her hand and pressed it against his cheek.

"I hated how you captivated me so completely."

His eyes grew somber. Maxi sat up and climbed onto his lap.

"I-I never… disliked you. It's true, I was scared… but I always thought y-you were dashing. That was why… I was more nervous when you were around."

His gaze bore into her as if to determine whether she was telling the truth. Then, draping the blanket over her pale shoulders, he pulled her into a crushing embrace. Being encircled in his warm, muscular arms felt unbearably euphoric. She leaned her head in the hollow of his shoulder and exhaled a shaky breath. Was this how a baby bird in a warm nest felt?

It was as if all the heartache, sorrow, fear, and pain melted away in the comfortable air enveloping them.

Watching the shifting shadows, Maxi abruptly asked, "W-Were you… ever disappointed in me?"

His sturdy arms tightened around her.

"I…" she said in a weak voice, "stutter… a-and I miscarried our child… I-I am sure I'm not… the lofty noblewoman you think I—"

"You are everything I dreamed you would be," he said gruffly. "No, that's not right. You are beyond what I ever imagined. You are impossibly brave, suffocatingly lovable. As for the child…"

Riftan gulped as though his throat was parched.

"To be honest, I don't even want one anymore. You have no idea how much blood you lost that day. I don't want to risk something like that happening ever again."

Maxi felt a faint tremor go through him, and she blinked her misty eyes. She hated herself for feeling relieved.

It was undeniable that he needed an heir, not to mention that producing one was her most fundamental duty as his wife. Her own mother had gone through several pregnancies and miscarriages to fulfill this obligation at the expense of her own life. Considering her father's obsession with securing a male heir, Riftan's remark was baffling.

Maxi narrowed her eyes, trying to ascertain his sincerity. Riftan lowered his head to kiss her wet eyelid.

"You are all I need."

His words seemed to reverberate in her heart. As she burrowed herself against his chest, their merged shadows looked like a strangely-formed animal. How wonderful it would be if they could become a single entity like that, never to be separated again. She wished that they were the only two people in the world.

Inebriated by the pleasant sensation of his hand stroking her hair, Maxi closed her heavy eyelids. A calm lull settled over them as the rain eased.

◆◆◆

After Riftan rescinded Anatol's declaration of war, the tension that had engulfed Calypse Castle immediately evaporated. Though it was obvious that the security at the ramparts was still heightened, the coming and going of mercenaries and weapon-laden carts noticeably decreased.

Maxi waited for the right time to inform Riftan about her father's secret scheme. To her surprise, Riftan took the news calmly.

"We were expecting this. He appears to be putting pressure on the merchants to stop them coming to Anatol."

Maxi's face fell. Anatol was a small territory surrounded by mountains, and it had little arable land. It thus relied on trade for most of its food supply. If the big merchant guilds were to cease trading here, they would not be able to last the year.

"Th-Then… what should we do?" she asked, sounding distressed. "If the merchants stop doing business with us… we won't be able to last the win—"

"There is no real threat," Riftan replied apathetically while he oiled his sword. "Merchants from the Southern Continent still come in through the port. In the future, large quantities of spices and silk will pass through Anatol annually. If any merchant stops coming, it would be their loss."

Though his calm explanation was somewhat reassuring, Maxi knew how tenacious her father could be. She could not help but worry.

"H-He might be… plotting other things. My father w-would never be content with that sort of retaliation…"

With a sigh, Riftan lowered his sword and strode over. He picked Maxi up and perched himself on the edge of the bed.

"There are still merchants who want to continue business in Anatol," he said as though reassuring a child, "and I've commissioned them to keep track of the duke's movements. You don't have to worry about anything."

Maxi sullenly hung her head. "I-I'm sorry. It's all because of me."

"Stop it," he said brusquely. "None of this is your fault."

He fiddled with the lock of her hair he had wound around his fist. Maxi suppressed a sigh as she studied his solemn face. It seemed that Riftan was waiting for the Duke of Croyso to make the first move. He would be ready to fight the moment the duke provided him with an excuse. The whole situation felt like a dam on the brink of collapse.

Despite her worries, time passed peacefully, and Calypse Castle began bustling with winter preparations. The weather grew colder by the day as Paxias drew closer.

After two weeks, even Maxi's anxieties abated. People rarely traveled out of their estates when the weather was like this. Even if the Duke of Croyso were plotting something, he would have to wait until the end of winter to execute it. It occurred to Maxi that she would only be making herself miserable by worrying prematurely.

She forced the thoughts from her mind. The truth was that she barely had time to be worried. Ever since withdrawing the war declaration, Riftan was always by her side.

She flicked a glance at him as she brushed Rem's mane. Clad in comfortable garments, Riftan leisurely fed Talon an apple. His casual attire suggested that he would not be going to the training grounds or leaving the castle. Maxi furrowed her brow.

Though their days together were blissful, she worried that he was allocating too much time for her. She knew first-hand how busy he was. After silently brushing Rem's mane for a long while, Maxi cautiously probed him.

"A-Aren't you busy? You don't… have to tax yourself by trying to spend so much time with me anymore. I'm better now, and…"

"The road construction is finished, as are the winter preparations. The only thing left for me to worry about is our defenses," Riftan

said, looking slightly displeased. “Does having me around annoy you?”

“O-Of course not. It’s just that, last year… you barely had time to sleep… And now spending all this time with me, I thought…”

“I’d just returned from the campaign last year. I was busy taking care of a backlog of matters. I have no intention of working so hard for the rest of my life.”

“I would like to voice my objection to that.”

Startled by the intruder, Maxi whirled around. A disgruntled Hebaron was standing at the stable’s entrance.

“You’re not planning on making me oversee all the training sessions, are you? I’m already up to my ears managing the guardhouse.”

“Don’t talk as if you’ve taken on all the burden. I know you’ve dumped your guardhouse duties on Elliot,” Riftan replied. He grabbed another apple from the manger and held it out for Talon. “After all your fooling around, it’s the least you can do without grumbling.”

Hebaron’s lips twitched as if to shoot back before he flicked a glance at Maxi. He heaved a sigh.

“We’ll talk about it soon… Right now, you’re needed in the knights’ quarters. Our spies are back from the duchy.”

Maxi flinched and grew still. Riftan shot Hebaron a cold glare.

“I won’t be long. Wait for me there.”

Chapter 182

"Don't tarry too long."

Hebaron shrugged his brawny shoulders as he walked out. Riftan finished feeding Talon the apple before he went to wash his hands in a pail of water.

"You should return to the bedchamber."

Riftan shook his hands dry and picked up the overgarment he had draped over the stall divider. Rem snorted, and Maxi stroked her neck as she anxiously searched Riftan's face.

"D-Do you… think something happened?"

"The spies we sent to the duchy have returned. That's it."

After gauging Maxi's dark expression, Riftan let out a low sigh and draped her cloak around her shoulders.

"It's nothing, so stop worrying and get some rest. I want you to go straight to our chambers. No wandering off."

He swept her messy bangs upward and kissed her forehead. Maxi forced a smile. They made their way back to the castle, where Riftan watched her go inside before heading to the training grounds.

Maxi returned to her room and vacantly stared out the window. The bare, dark branches of the trees made them look charred. They swayed in the breeze under the hazy gray sky. Faint rays of silver sunlight peeked through the clouds from time to time, but it was not enough to enliven the desolate, wind-swept garden.

With a sigh, Maxi pulled a chair close to the fireplace and sat down. Out of all the cats, Roy was the most attached to her. He immediately jumped onto her lap and began purring. His contentment lifted her spirits somewhat, and she felt her anxiety easing as she stroked his soft fur.

It was evening when Riftan finally returned to their chambers. Taking his cloak, Maxi looked up at him expectantly, waiting for him

to tell her what they had discussed in the council room. Riftan said nothing and simply strode over to the fire. He removed his boots and began washing his hands in the warm water the servants had prepared.

He finally turned to look at her as she grabbed a towel for him.

"Have you eaten?"

"Y-Yes, a while ago. And you? Should I… ask the servants to bring you some food?"

"No, I had a simple meal in the council room."

Riftan washed his face and dried himself with the towel. While nervously studying his expression, Maxi ran out of patience.

"H-Have you discovered… what my father is plotting?"

A light crease formed on Riftan's forehead. He seemed to debate silently for a moment before shaking his head.

"The only thing we've managed to find out is that your father is in frequent contact with his vassals."

Maxi narrowed her eyes. The men would not have deliberated for so long if that was the sole piece of information they had received. She was certain that they must have discovered something serious for Hebaron to come searching for Riftan in such a hurry.

Maxi pressed her lips together with a dissatisfied expression. Sensing her suspicion, Riftan heaved a sigh.

"No matter what Croyso is up to, it's for me to deal with. You don't have to concern yourself with that man any longer."

"H-How can I? He is… my father. And all of this is my fault…"

Riftan threw the towel onto the rack and growled, "A bastard who whips his own child is no father."

Maxi recoiled at the intensity of his disdain.

"What I meant… was that I am also responsible… f-for our current situation. I have the right to know… w-what is happen—"

"How many times have I said this? None of this is your fault," Riftan said gruffly. "I beat the man, and now he's throwing a fit. That's it. This is between him and me."

"I-I am… the reason you hit him!" Maxi yelled, riled by his stubbornness. "How can you… s-say that I have… nothing to do w-with this? I was there when it happened! If it weren't for me, y-you

wouldn't have done such a thing… a-and my father would not be putting pressure on—"

"Fine." Riftan strode over and angrily shot back, "Let's say all of this is your fault. What do you intend to do then?"

Maxi's face flushed. He was right, of course. There was nothing she could do. Not wanting to admit it, she replied through clenched teeth, "W-Who knows? There might be s-something I could…"

"There is nothing. And even if there was, I would never ask for your help."

The color drained from Maxi's face at his cold words. She stared at him in shock before backing away. She was about to race out of the room when Riftan caught her arm and picked her up.

Maxi struggled against his embrace, slamming her fists on his shoulders. Without batting an eye, Riftan grabbed the back of her head and ravaged her lips.

Clenching her jaw, Maxi yanked at his hair to pry him off. He frowned and lightly bit her lip. When her lips parted from the stinging pain, his soft, hot tongue pushed into her mouth.

Maxi hated how easily she melted in his arms. He entwined her tongue with his own, sucking lightly. When he explored the roof of her mouth and the insides of her cheeks, a titillating shudder ran down from behind her ears. Her limbs went limp.

Her chest heaving, Maxi glowered at him. "Y-You can be… rather spiteful… at times."

"Don't say that," he muttered gruffly, then kissed her cheek and wet eyes. "I never rely on anyone, and I especially refuse to rely on you."

His words stabbed at her heart like daggers. Maxi glared at him, her face etched with hurt.

"Then… I-I also refuse to rely on you. I forbid you f-from taking any interest in my affairs!"

Riftan's face turned steely at her threat. "Stop talking nonsense. You are my wife, and it's my duty to protect you!"

"Are you saying… you are free to meddle in my affairs… w-while I am not?"

"That's right."

His immediate reply left Maxi speechless. Looking her dead in the eyes, Riftan spoke slowly and clearly.

"I will solve all your problems as well as my own. I won't let you take anything upon yourself ever again."

"Th-That's—"

He stopped her rebuttal with another kiss. Maxi placed her hands on his shoulders to push him away, but when she finally came to her senses, she found herself frantically pulling him closer.

Her head spun every time his soft tongue entered and retreated from her mouth. An exhilarating heat rose from the pit of her stomach as he stroked her.

Fighting for air, Maxi clawed at his chest. When he pulled her bodice down and began nibbling her pale shoulder, a sharp sensation coursed from her nape down to her spine.

Maxi's whole body shuddered. Riftan gently cupped her taut breast and, after teasing it for a bit, he lightly flicked the sensitive part with his finger. All of Maxi's resistance melted away like butter in the height of summer.

His hold over her was frightening. Maxi twisted away in an attempt to free herself, but Riftan restrained her without much effort. He pulled her bodice further down and gently sucked the tip of her breast.

It felt as though her whole body would get sucked in. Maxi clutched his slick hair. The intense pleasure was almost unbelievable considering she was burning with anger.

After a period of futile struggle, she eventually slid her hands inside his tunic. She pushed her tongue into his mouth while fondling his sculpted chest, and his eyes seemed to ignite. He laid her on the bed and crushed her beneath him.

Before she knew it, she was completely undressed. Riftan peppered kisses across her naked body. His hair, dark as crows' feathers, tickled her burning skin.

The intense desire was too much to bear. Maxi wrapped her legs around his waist, urging him. Riftan swore under his breath and immediately thrust into her. She writhed under him like a snake. The

pungent aroma of bodily fluids and perspiration mingled in the tepid air.

He pushed deeper inside her as he relentlessly devoured her lips. She inhaled his exhales, as did he with hers.

He let out a moan, his lips quivering. His every action, including the light shudder that coursed through him, felt like Maxi's own. The only thing burrowed somewhere she could not reach was his heart. She trembled and dug her nails into his forearms.

The sheets were a crumpled mess beneath them. Maxi's disheveled hair clung to her sweat-slicked face. Still not satisfied despite having driven her to her limits, Riftan began to move in earnest. As she bounced up and down, Maxi's whole body grew tense like a tightly-drawn bowstring.

It did not take long before he reached his release inside her. Once the roiling heat subsided, a strange sense of emptiness engulfed her heart. Maxi went slack on the bed, her body growing cold.

Unable to bear the silence, Riftan pulled her into his arms.

"Don't blame yourself for any of this. That bastard was the one who hurt you, he is the one at fault. You're the victim. I don't regret beating him to a pulp, and I would've done it sooner had I known the truth. If I'd been luckier, I might have gotten to kill him."

He caressed her damp limbs and rubbed his nose against her nape.

"So don't blame yourself."

Maxi tilted her head to look at him, her eyes misty. Listening to him stubbornly absolve her of any responsibility made her heart ache. He always tried to protect her from anything that could cause trouble.

This was a man who had no desire to share his burdens with her, no matter how small. Or rather, she was the one who constantly weighed him down with one heavy burden after another.

Chapter 183

A crease wrinkled Riftan's forehead as he noticed Maxi's eyes clouding over with sadness. He cupped her cheek and gently thumbed the corner of one of them. Maxi took his hand and brought it to her lips.

"Th-Then… what should I do for you?"

His face half-buried in the pillow, he suddenly looked filled with longing. His eyes seemed to plead with her about something she could not understand. When he replied, his distant voice seemed to tickle her ears.

"Nothing… I just need you to stay by my side."

Crestfallen, Maxi's eyes drooped to the floor. For the first time in her life, she realized just how miserable it could be to have nothing expected of her. Riftan seemed displeased at her morose expression. He frowned and pulled her on top of him again.

They began making love, and this time it was tormentingly gentle and slow. He teased her rosy breast with his mouth for an unbearably long time. He moved against her in long strokes until her eyes grew unfocused and she melted with pleasure. After it was over, Maxi fell asleep slumped on his chiseled chest.

She had no idea how long she slept before she awoke to a suffocating heat. The fireplace had been so well stacked with wood that the flames were still blazing even into the late hours of the night. Maxi found herself sweating from the warmth of the fire and the heat radiating from Riftan's body.

Getting out of bed, she threw on a robe and walked over to the window. She cracked it open and was cooling herself off when she saw something twinkling in the dark. Small, white flakes of snow fell from the ink-blue sky.

Maxi stuck her head out to let the snowflakes brush her face. The crisp night air quickly chilled her sweaty body, but she did not feel

like returning to bed. She stood by the window enraptured by the snowflakes fluttering in the wind until she felt a sheet fall across her shoulders.

Maxi looked up to see Riftan standing behind her. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the back of her head.

"You'll catch a cold."

"I-I was feeling a bit warm."

His hair was a tousled mess, and for once his eyes looked drowsy. Seeing him so at ease made her frustrations melt away like snow. Confounded by her emotions, she put on a resigned smile.

"L-Look… it's the first snow."

Riftan sighed and rubbed his warm, moist lips on her nape.

"I remember watching the first snow together last year as well. Do you want to go to the lake again in the morning?"

"R-Really? You're letting me out of the castle?"

"It'll be fine if you're with me. We can go to the village as well if you'd like."

If the suggestion had been a ploy to take her mind off her father's schemes, it had succeeded. Maxi shuffled around and returned his embrace.

Although the first snow did not fall for long, the frigid weather preserved the white frost that covered the landscape long after sunrise. Maxi was infinitely glad that winter had come earlier than usual. Her father would have to delay his wicked plans for a while.

She had stopped trying to pry for information. Riftan had a point; it was not as if she could come up with a countermeasure if she knew what her father was plotting. It would undoubtedly only make her feel gloomier.

After forcing the worries from her mind, Maxi decided that she would simply enjoy the time she got to spend with Riftan. Lately, he had been refusing to leave her side. He took her to the winter lake as promised, and when the coldness had somewhat abated, they left the castle grounds to visit the village.

Maxi toured the newly built, four-story merchant guild. After that, they browsed the market, now made up of closely packed stone

buildings. The square was full of merchants from the South selling a variety of rare goods, and the streets bustled with people despite the cold weather. Maxi perused everything until she was completely satisfied.

Belts made of Southern silks and snakeskin, animal figures carved from ivory, extravagant furs, an array of spices and rare herbs — Riftan bought everything Maxi showed an interest in. On their way back, he promised to take her to the port as soon as the weather was warmer.

Maxi tried to imagine them strolling the coast and enjoying the spring breeze. It was such a sweet image that she desperately wanted his reassurance to be true and that nothing bad would happen.

Indeed, what could her father possibly do now? Going public with the assault would only disgrace him and the Croyso name. Her proud father would never risk such public shame to exact revenge. He would likely give up once his efforts to isolate Anatol failed. Maxi resolved to be optimistic.

As she had expected, time passed peacefully. Thanks to the knights scouring Anatolium, Anatol suffered no further monster attacks. Neither did the Duke of Croyso end up besieging them in a fit of anger.

Maxi and Riftan whiled away the time like a pair of hibernating bears in a cave. All day long, they would roll around in bed, eat, sleep, and make love with no regard for the time. As the idyllic days continued, Maxi completely forgot her worries.

Unfortunately, the peace did not last long. A messenger arrived at Calypse Castle. Though Riftan promptly led the visitor to the council room, Maxi recognized the envoy right away. It was the same knight who had been sent to them by the Earl of Loverne last spring.

Levia. I think that was his name.

Maxi's face fell when she recalled that they had agreed to an alliance with the earl last year. To think that he would send someone to them at such a time… Were monsters about again? The earl might have sent his men to seek the Remdragon Knights' assistance.

Maxi paced around her bedchamber, nibbling her nails. Her heart clenched at the possibility that Riftan would have to lead his knights to battle in the middle of winter. Was her deep-rooted malady acting up again?

Though she wanted to maintain her composure and be brave no matter what happened, she did not know how. Maxi sighed as she fidgeted with her long braid. It was possible that being a knight's wife meant a life of constant anxiety. Would she have tried to stop herself from falling for Riftan if she had known? Regardless of the answer, she could no longer imagine being indifferent to him now.

Maxi sank onto the bed and hugged her knees. Why was life not like a rainbow? Why could it not be a paradise of verdant fields? She was sick and tired of the constant adversity hanging over their heads.

These useless thoughts swirled in her mind until she heard a knock at the door. She leaped out of bed. It could be Riftan sending someone to summon her. Without asking who it was, she swung open the door and found herself staring into a brawny chest that nearly blocked the whole doorway.

Maxi flinched and backed away. She jerked her heap up and met Hebaron's grim face.

"W-What brings you here?"

"If you could spare the time, my lady, there is something I wish to discuss with you," the knight muttered awkwardly as he scratched behind his ear.

Without hesitation, Maxi grabbed her robe and stepped out. Hebaron immediately started down the corridor. What did the knight want to discuss with her? It did not seem like it was Riftan who had sent him. She glanced over Hebaron's tense back. He must have felt her gaze, as he gave her a reassuring smile over his shoulder.

"I apologize for surprising you, but it was an urgent matter… I was actually waiting for you to come to the infirmary, but you haven't been gracing us with your presence of late."

Maxi blushed and mumbled an excuse. "W-With Ruth… and Melric in the castle… I didn't think the infirmary needed my help…"

"Oh, I didn't mean it as a reproach. We are well aware that the commander's ailment is growing worse."

Maxi was taken aback. "A-Ailment?"

"His overprotectiveness where you are concerned, my lady." He chuckled, then added, "It seems that it's closer to obsession now. The others and I were beginning to fear that he was confining you to your chambers."

"P-Please don't exaggerate. Riftan is simply… w-worried for me."

"Hmm. That's too mild a word for it. I'm not sure if I should be telling you this, but the commander hasn't been himself lately. He gets agitated when he's away from you for too long, and it's been a while since he stepped foot in the training grounds."

Maxi stiffened when she saw the concern in the knight's eyes. Though she had been aware of the amount of time Riftan had been spending with her, she had never once thought it a serious problem.

Hebaron's brow furrowed slightly. "The commander would likely demand my head if he found out I came to see you, but I couldn't just stand by and do nothing…"

"What on earth is it…? P-Please, tell me everything."

"We should head out first. I'll explain everything once we find a quiet place to talk."

With that, he strode briskly down the stairs. Maxi silently followed. Hebaron made his way toward the path that led from the kitchen's back door. When they reached a secluded spot, he finally began to speak.

"Have you heard the news from the spies we sent to the duchy?"

After a moment of vacant blinking, Maxi shook her head with a bitter expression. "R-Riftan… did not tell me anything."

"I thought that would be the case."

Hebaron sighed as he kicked a jagged stone on the winding dirt path with his boot. Silence fell over them once more. What was making this audacious knight hesitate like this? Maxi was gazing at him with an anxious expression when he began to speak once more.

"The duke is preparing for a trial. He has apparently wheedled all the nobles in the east as well as the king's retainers in the royal

palace into taking his side. We took immediate action as well, but at this rate, we won't be able to stop a formal trial."

It felt as though she had been doused with ice water. Maxi looked up at Hebaron, her face draining of color. The royal tribunal only ever oversaw trials of the nobility. It was an institution dating back to the age of the feudal lords, with its power exceeding even that of the king's laws.

With the feudal lords and monarch currently locked in a subtle power struggle, a noble requesting the king to proceed over his case was no different from the noble undermining his own authority.

Unable to believe her ears, Maxi sought confirmation.

"Y-You mean… my father has petitioned for a case against Riftan?"

"Yes. I think he intends to pursue this all the way without caring about appearances." Hebaron clicked his tongue. "It might just end with a fine if we're lucky, but he's been putting so much effort into this trial that I doubt he'll let it conclude so easily. He will most likely demand that the commander be stripped of his knighthood. If he has the backing of the other nobles, even King Reuben won't be able to ignore his demands."

"Th-Then what…?"

Maxi was half out of her mind with worry as she clung to his sleeve.

Hebaron looked down at her with somber eyes. "We must prove that the commander's actions were warranted. Would you be willing… to testify against the duke?"

Maxi's face flushed crimson. The mere thought of standing in court and stammering her father's wretched treatment of her in front of the king and the nobility of Wedon was enough to make her break out in cold sweat. Even so, she was willing to stand naked in the city square if it meant she could save Riftan from this plight.

Biting her lip, Maxi nodded. "O-Of course. I would… gladly do so."

Relief briefly flashed across Hebaron's face. "I know what a difficult request this is, my lady. The commander even threatened to fight to the death anyone who dared to inform you of this matter."

The knight ran a hand over his face and heaved a sigh.

"He wouldn't listen to reason. I've been waiting for a chance to talk to you, but it's been incredibly difficult to come by. He certainly kept a close watch on you."

Dumbfounded, Maxi furrowed her brows. "What was he… going to do w-without telling me about this?"

"He isn't being bullheaded with no plan. He's been trying to buy the Southern nobles to our side, but we all know the outcome is inevitable."

Hebaron scratched his head as if to show just how fed up he was. Maxi bit her lip. As the knight pointed out, the Duke of Croyso's influence was formidable. It would be impossible for Riftan to beat her father politically.

"That is why the Earl of Loverne sent a messenger. The royal family is trying to do whatever it takes to settle this before it formally goes to court. There is to be a mediation in Loverne, who is Anatol's ally, and it will hopefully be to the commander's advantage."

Chapter 184

"D-Do you mean… there might not be a trial?"

"If the mediation ends well, yes."

Hebaron stared at nothing in particular and stroked his chin as though he were weighing all the possibilities.

"King Reuben announced that he would personally come down to act as mediator, so I'm sure the Duke of Croyso would feel some pressure. But that arrogant duke must be determined, seeing as he's taken it this far. You shouldn't get your hopes up."

"M-My father… wants my sister to marry into the royal family. If the king a-actively takes Riftan's side… even my father won't be able to come on too strong," Maxi said in an attempt to convince herself.

Hebaron sighed and roughly scratched at the back of his head. "To be honest, I'm not sure how strongly King Reuben is willing to be on our side. He will likely avoid stripping the commander of his knighthood, but I doubt he'll make an obvious effort to shield him from the duke. Especially if it could earn him the enmity of the nobles. If there's one thing the king values most, it's the unity of Wedon."

Apprehension filled Maxi's chest. "I-If I testify… will we have a chance of winning?"

Maxi secretly hoped that Hebaron would grin and tell her not to worry. When the knight gave his answer, however, his face was nothing but somber.

"I can't guarantee how it will end. A trial without substantial evidence is essentially a battle of who's right. The side with the more powerful argument is bound to win."

Maxi bunched her skirt in her fists and wet her parched lips. "When… i-is the mediation?"

"I'm told that, as a rule, the royal tribunal does not try cases during Paxias. The nobles who hold offices in Drachium Castle must

all be present for a trial to be held. I'd wager King Reuben would want to settle this matter before then."

The knight looked up at the sky as if to calculate the timeframe and added slowly, "I think a date will be set within a few weeks. The commander will depart for Loverne with some of the knights before the duke and the king are expected to get there."

"D-Do you think… I could go as well?"

Hebaron hesitated, then released a long sigh. "If you can convince the commander to take you."

Maxi pressed her temple. Riftan was an obstinate man. So much so that he had even kept her in the dark about something of this magnitude. Talking to a wall would be easier.

Just the thought of the arguments to come made Maxi feel weary. She folded her cold forearms.

"I-I understand," she said gravely. "I will… talk to him."

"Please forgive me for putting this burden on you, my lady."

Guilt crossed Hebaron's face, and Maxi shook her head.

"N-No, I'm grateful that you told me. Not knowing anything… would have been worse."

Maxi immediately returned to her chambers and waited for Riftan. Her head was close to exploding from trying to think of a good way to start the conversation.

Should she be angry at him for keeping all of this from her, or should she implore and coax him? After pacing in front of the fireplace, she flopped onto the bed, her head thumping horribly. She was staring up at the canopy when her eyes suddenly burned with tears. She did not know why she was crying.

It was clear that her father held no affection for her, so it was not that she was disappointed by that fact now. It simply pained her that Riftan was the one paying the price. Maxi squeezed her eyes shut. She could not allow him to be placed in such a dishonorable position where he would be chastised and forced to defend himself in front of a group of haughty nobles.

Her resolve solidified as her tears dried. She no longer cared about the shame or ridicule she would suffer. If necessary, she

would reveal her grim past in its entirety. So what if she became the topic of whispered conversations?

However, the thought of Riftan becoming an object of ridicule and pity broke her heart. Would they not deride him for having a woman like her as a wife? Filled with shame, Maxi covered her face with her hands.

They would have to get the duke to withdraw his case before it went to a formal trial. Her father valued his reputation above all else; if he were to learn of her intention to testify, it might change his mind.

She was immersed in such thoughts when she heard the door rattle open. Maxi shot to her feet. Riftan's eyes widened at her disheveled appearance, and his lips curled into a smile.

"Were you having a nap?" He strode over to the bed and brushed her messy hair with his fingers. "Did I wear you out last night?"

He smiled playfully at her as though nothing was wrong. Maxi looked up at him with clouded eyes, her hopes that he might explain the messenger's visit evaporating into thin air. He was not going to tell her anything.

After gnawing her lip, Maxi finally managed to find her words.

"I saw… the messenger from Loverne… e-enter the castle a while ago."

Riftan's smile faltered. "Our guests will be leaving in a few days. I've assigned servants to attend to them, so you don't have to worry."

"Are you not going to tell me… the reason f-for their visit?"

Holding onto a shred of hope, Maxi regarded him woefully. Riftan looked away and gave an evasive answer.

"Some of the merchants are planning ventures with Anatol as their foothold. The earl also wants in on the business."

Maxi's face grew stony. "That is a little different… from what I heard."

Riftan's eyes immediately looked guarded. He shot to his feet and took a step back from the bed.

"What nonsense did you hear, and from whom?"

"I-It wasn't nonsense. It was… a fact you should have told me s-sooner."

Riftan narrowed his eyes. He shook his head and gave a cold, dismissive smile. "I don't know what it was you heard, but I want you to forget it."

Maxi rose and stood before him. Though she wished to appear confident, the disparity between their statures made her feel even smaller and more vulnerable. She steeled her faltering heart and glared at him.

"You can't… keep me away from problems like this forever, Riftan." Trying her best to enunciate each of her words, Maxi took a deep breath and continued. "Especially when… it is my father who is harassing you."

"Who told you of this?" Riftan growled savagely. "Was it Ruth? Hebaron? Only those two would dare to go against my orders."

"Th-That's not important. We should discuss what we are going to __"

"I don't need your help!" Riftan bellowed. "I beg you, just let me handle it!"

"H-How can I?!"

Drowning in despair, Maxi's chest heaved as she fought for breath.

"How can I… feign ignorance?! You stubbornly refuse to admit that i-it is my fault… but it is! If you were to lose your knighthood… it would be because of m-me! Do you… w-want me to carry that guilt for the rest of my life? Is that… what you want?"

She pounded her fists against his chest in anger.

"Nothing you say will change anything," said Riftan, grabbing her wrists. "If you thought I'd let you stand in court, then you do not know me at all. I can deal with this without you getting involved!"

Tears welled in her eyes. Maxi tried to contain them and glared at him through her misty vision.

"S-stop being so stubborn! My father will also present a witness. You need s-someone to defend you."

"But that will never be you," he hissed through clenched teeth. "If worse comes to worst, I'll have Ursuline or Elliot testify, so stay out of this."

"I-It won't be as effective as having me! I am the duke's d-daughter… and the cause of all this. My testimony… w-will have more credibility!"

"How many times must I tell you no?!"

As if forced into a corner, Riftan's face twisted viciously.

"You want me to… make you do that to protect myself? To put you in front of those abhorrent people and force you to reveal everything you so desperately tried to keep hidden? I'd rather be stripped of my knighthood!"

Maxi desperately wished she were strong enough to grab and shake him until he came to his senses. How could her dignity be more important than his honor? Compared to his rank, estate, and reputation, her dignity was nothing.

"I-I… do not mind," Maxi pleaded. "I would… only be testifying about what happened that day. I-It would not be difficult."

"That's enough. I don't want to discuss this any longer."

Pushing her hand away, he turned around and headed for the door. Maxi felt a blaze of anger rise up at the sight of him walking away. She immediately went after him and yanked his tunic.

As soon as Riftan turned in surprise, she yelled, "Don't even th-think about leaving! I am going to testify… no matter what you say! If you won't take me… th-then I'll make my own way there!"

Riftan's eyes grew cold.

"Do you want me to lock you up?" he snarled with a fury equal to hers.

Maxi gazed back in shock before her expression turned steely. "A-Are you saying you will do as my father did?"

The blood drained from Riftan's face. Driving a knife into his heart would not have elicited the same expression as what Maxi saw now. The bleakness in his eyes instantly drained all the fight in her. With a gasp, she pulled his rigid body into her arms.

"I-I'm sorry. I should not have s-said such a thing! You are nothing like my father. I know you're only t-trying to protect me."

Riftan drew a ragged breath and gazed down at her. She had never seen him look more vulnerable. Cupping his face, Maxi kissed the tip of his chin.

"P-Please, try to understand. As much as you w-want to protect me… I also want to do everything I can for you. It pains me… t-to do nothing… when you are in trouble. Please… don't force such torment on me."

"I…" His voice came out strangled. He extricated himself from her grip and said, "I need time to think about it."

"R-Riftan…"

Maxi reached out to stop him, but decided against it and lowered her hands. She did not want to push him any further. The mediation was still a while away, and she would take her time convincing him. She looked on despondently as he walked out of the room as though he were fleeing.

Being compared to the Duke of Croyso must have come as a shock to Riftan. Ever since their argument, he no longer raised his voice or threatened her. She took full advantage of his moment of weakness and was persistent in her efforts to convince him.

A few days away from their departure to Loverne, Riftan finally raised the white flag. The moment of surrender was when Maxi threatened to secretly ride out to Loverne on her own if he refused to take her with him. It also helped that the mediation was only a small gathering of the duke, the king, and a few witnesses — a better proposition than having her testify in court.

Chapter 185

"I've learned that it's better to keep you in my sight so I can stop you from doing the next reckless thing."

It was the day of their departure. Riftan mumbled this gloomily as he watched Maxi climb into the carriage.

Maxi's face flushed. It appeared that Riftan was half-terrified of what she might do if he were to leave her behind. Frustration simmered in his eyes, but his face was as cold as an iron mask. This whole affair had kept him tossing and turning all night, contributing to him being more short-tempered than usual.

"Nothing good ever came from leaving you behind. For my sanity's sake, I'll keep you where I can see you."

Instead of firing back, Maxi sat down and nodded meekly. Riftan narrowed his eyes, then bent to wrap a fur coat around her. Despite his anger, he took the time to ensure her safety, firmly securing the charcoal-filled iron brazier onto the carriage floor and sealing the windows against the wind.

"It will take a day and a half to reach Loverne Castle. We'll be traveling without rest through Anatolium, so you must tell me if you feel tired."

"I-I understand."

Riftan lingered at the carriage entrance as though conflicted before he sighed and shut the door. Maxi pushed aside the drapes and peered out at the twenty or so mounted knights surrounding the carriage.

Hebaron must have been put in charge of Anatol's safety while they were away, as he was nowhere to be found. It was Ursuline and Elliot who stood at the head of the ranks. Riftan issued a command as he mounted his horse, and the carriage began to roll forward.

Maxi sat huddled against the icy air and watched the scenery pass by. Although the coldest period had passed, it was still winter. The ground was frozen and slippery, and the previous night's sleet shimmered like diamonds at the edges of the road.

The knights rode through the frigid eastern wind. Maxi looked over in concern before drawing the curtain and leaning back against the coach seat. In two days, they were going to fight a bitter battle against an opponent far more dangerous than any monster. She would have to preserve her energy as much as possible.

Closing her eyes, Maxi thought back to King Reuben's indifferent expression and her father's cruel mask. Going up against them would be more grueling than facing any troll army.

A bleak but determined aura enveloped the knights as they set off. They headed northeast, and Maxi could not help but worry that they might run into goblins or werewolves. Her fears were put to rest not long after, when the tranquility of the forest made it seem as though the whole world had gone into hibernation.

"A-Are monsters… less active during Paxias?" asked Maxi when they had passed safely through Anatolium.

The knights were now gathered in a grassy field busily preparing lunch. In the center, Elliot was lighting a campfire. He gave her a faint smile as he answered.

"We scoured the mountains all through last season and cleared all of their nests."

Ruth, who was tearing jerky into a large pot, added, "It was the burgeoning troll population that caused the monster migration. Monsters usually live in a tight ecosystem, so they're forced to find another habitat if a group expands beyond its territory. After we nearly exterminated the trolls up north, the monsters that were pushed south should have returned to their original lands."

"Th-Then I suppose… they won't be troubling us so much… from now on."

"Compared to how it used to be, certainly not."

Once they had finished lunch, they returned to the road without delay. True to Ruth's words, Maxi did not spot a single goblin the

entire way to Loverne. It was probably the safest journey she had taken so far.

They arrived at a small village as night fell. They rented two cottages, then departed at daybreak. Thanks to their haste, they reached Loverne Castle before noon on the second day.

Maxi climbed out of the carriage and inspected the gloomy-looking fortress. A bluish-gray brick wall enclosed the castle, and dark towers made of iron rose like sentinels on either side of the gate.

Feeling strangely intimidated, Maxi stuck close to Riftan. He wrapped a protective arm around her as he walked on.

Inside the castle, they followed a sentry through a second door that opened onto a garden. Large trees crowded the foot of the stairway to the main building. Servants rushed down to greet them.

"We welcome you to Loverne," said the steward. "The earl has been expecting you."

"And the others?"

"You are the first to arrive, my lord. The other guests are due tomorrow."

The tension in Maxi's shoulders eased. Relief washed over her at the news that she would not have to face her father immediately. One of the knights behind them mumbled something about having a day to catch their breaths, and Maxi wholeheartedly agreed.

The servants led them into a spacious hall covered in smooth, marble floors. A stately-looking man came to greet them, trailed by dozens of servants. His lavish attire, pale visage typical among the gentry, and bored eyes told Maxi that this was the owner of the castle. Skipping the initial niceties, the Earl of Loverne heaved a sigh.

"Some trouble you've started, Calypse."

Maxi frowned. Although the earl was higher in rank, Riftan was also a lord of his own fief. It was insulting for the earl not to show him the barest of courtesies. However, Riftan responded with an indifference that suggested he was used to the man's manners.

"I'll make sure you won't suffer any losses from this."

"I'm already in the duke's bad books because of my alliance with Anatol," the earl grumbled. "Some of the merchants have already

given me preposterous excuses to cut business with me when the real reason is obvious. Did you have to stir the hornets' nest knowing how tenacious the duke is?"

"It was warranted."

"I'm asking *why*. What possessed you to do such a thing when you've been putting up with him so well thus far? You confound me."

The earl clasped his hands behind his back and began to harp on at Riftan.

"And what of my significant investments into Anatol's business ventures? If you are exiled, what use would that new road be? I'm sure you don't want to lose the lands you've spent a decade trying to develop. If you fail to appease the duke during this mediation, you and I will both suffer immeasurable losses."

Maxi's face fell at the bleakness of his predictions. Noticing the change in her expression, Riftan wrapped his arm around her shoulders and glared coldly at the earl.

"We braved this frigid weather to come all the way here. How long do you intend to keep us standing?"

The earl furrowed his brow followed by a shake of his head. "How impatient of me. I've prepared your rooms. You should get some rest."

He flicked his wrist, and the servants waiting behind came forward.

"A formidable battle of wills awaits us tomorrow. You should prepare yourself. I'll do what I can to help you since we're already in the same boat, but I'm afraid it still won't be enough. I pray that you have a solution up your sleeve."

With that grim warning, the earl marched up the stairs. Maxi watched his receding figure with mixed feelings. Though unsettled by his words, she was still glad that he planned on taking Riftan's side.

The Earl of Loverne was one of the most influential noblemen in these southern parts. He was not as powerful as the Duke of Croyso, but his support would still be of considerable help. After following the servants into an opulent guest room, Maxi turned to Riftan with a smile.

"The earl… m-might appear ill-tempered, but he seems to be concerned for you."

"That man is worried about his interests, not me." Riftan snorted as he removed his armor and set it on the stand. "He made significant investments into the road construction. He's probably worried sick that his trade plans will fall apart. After all, it's only because of the Remdragon Knights' reputation that so many merchants are willing to brave the Anatolium Mountains to come to the southern port."

This meant that many of the southern nobles would be obliged to take Riftan's side. Even if the mediation were to fail and they would have to stand before the royal tribunal, the trial might not be entirely rigged to the duke's advantage. Maxi felt a sliver of hope.

After changing out of his traveling clothes, Riftan left to deliberate with the earl about the imminent mediation. Meanwhile, Maxi took a bath using the hot water the castle's maidservants had brought to their room. When she was done, she unpacked her mountain of clothes and contemplated the next day's outfit.

Tomorrow might be her opportunity to speak in front of the king; she could not be too underdressed, nor too lavish. She wanted to appear elegant, sincere, and credible.

That's all I can do for Riftan…

After much deliberation, she decided on a dark blue dress. It made her face look paler and more somber.

She carefully assessed her reflection in the mirror and began to go over her speech. Though her tongue refused to cooperate more than usual because of her nerves, the words came easier the longer she persisted. After a while, she found herself able to state her case clearly, albeit a little awkwardly. It gave her some measure of confidence.

The very next day, all her hard work came undone the moment she spotted the Duke of Croyso's carriage entering the castle grounds. Maxi instantly felt like a powerless child once more.

She stood at the window as her father climbed the stairs leading to the great hall. He appeared to have brought at least a hundred knights with him. His men dazzled in shining armor as they trailed

behind him, followed by hierarchs and mages. It was impossible to tell if he was here for mediation or for war.

Surely he's not planning on attacking Riftan while pretending to obey the king, is he?

Maxi narrowed her eyes at the Croyso delegation, but her suspicions evaporated when she noticed the duke's wary demeanor. He had brought all these men solely for his own safety. The beating he had received from Riftan must have shaken him.

The duke hurried into the great hall like a man being pursued. Maxi grabbed her robe and stepped out of the room. Elliot, who had been standing guard at the door, promptly blocked her path.

"Is anything the matter, my lady?"

"I-I think my father has arrived. I-I thought… I'd talk to him before…"

"We are prohibited from interacting with the duke before the king's arrival," said Elliot, resolutely shaking his head. "A confrontation before the mediation would only serve to heighten animosities and make the situation worse. We must wait for the king."

It was a sound point. Even the Duke of Croyso would have to watch his words in the king's presence, and Riftan would have to repress his murderous hostility. That was what troubled her the most — that the duke's venomous tongue might send Riftan over the edge, initiating a fight to the death. Just imagining it filled her with dread.

Maxi anxiously paced the room and could not stop glancing out the window. At noon, three carriages and a procession of knights bearing royal banners finally entered Loverne Castle. By the time Maxi went downstairs to greet the king, the spacious hall was packed with hundreds of people.

Elliot spotted her dithering as she silently debated over where to stand. He politely led her to her spot.

"Please stay close to me, my lady. I was charged with your safety during the length of the mediation."

Maxi meekly followed and stood behind the Remdragon Knights. Soon after, King Reuben, Princess Agnes, and a group of attendants

entered the great hall. Riftan, the Duke of Croyso, and the Earl of Loverne stepped forward to kneel before the king.

"We thank you for undertaking this strenuous journey, Your Majesty."

The king apathetically waved his hand as the earl bowed his head.

"It was very strenuous indeed. How splendidly you all have managed to hassle me into journeying here in the middle of winter."

The king swept a haughty, golden gaze over his vassals.

"Here I am, as you wished. Let me make it clear, my dear duke, that I shall be greatly displeased if it turns out all that travel was for nothing."

Chapter 186

Even from this distance, Maxi could see her father clenching his jaw. It was something he did to hold himself back when his anger was at its peak. The veins in his hands bulged as he clutched his cane. He gave Riftan a murderous glare before replying to the king.

"If I may remind His Majesty… I did stress that taking this arduous journey was wholly unnecessary."

His speech was slightly slower but nowhere near enough to warrant ridicule. The degree of authority and pride ingrained in the Duke of Croyso's being refused to kowtow even before royalty. He would never allow himself to look pathetic.

Nonetheless, the humiliation of his defect stood stark on his face. Anger flashed in his eyes with each word he spat. He glowered at Riftan with such hatred that it sent a ripple of nervousness through the audience. Riftan's animosity was just as palpable.

King Reuben passed an annoyed gaze over the two men champing at the bit to rip each other's throats. He clicked his tongue. "Let us get a few hours' rest before we commence. It appears we'll have to step in before our favored vassals start stabbing each other."

"Allow me to escort you to your room, Your Majesty."

"No. You watch over these two to make sure they don't tear each other to shreds."

The earl responded with a bitter smile and instructed the castle's steward to show the royal guests to their chambers. King Reuben led the princess and his attendants up the staircase shrouded in gray shadow. As the royal delegation left the hall, those kneeling rose to their feet in unison.

Maxi watched uneasily as her father retreated behind his knights. A sense of foreboding rose in her chest at the malice she saw on his face. It was clear that no words would be able to change his mind.

Riftan directed a contemptuous glare at the duke's back, then turned away as though the sight of the man revolted him.

"Maxi, come here."

He strode over before starting toward the annex where they would be staying. As his reassuringly large frame blocked her father from view, Maxi finally exhaled. Riftan led her to an empty room and began to persuade her once more.

"I've told you countless times, you don't have to attend. This isn't a formal trial. It's just a meeting called by King Reuben to mediate between me and the duke."

Maxi resolutely shook her head.

"No matter what you say… I cannot s-stay out of this. My father intends to bring you to trial… for breaking into his castle and assaulting him when… you were only trying to save me…"

"I've always wanted to beat that man to death," Riftan said savagely.

Maxi exhaled a tired sigh. "Riftan… you believe that you had just cause for attacking my father, but how will you prove that if I am not part of your story?"

Riftan looked defeated. Maxi clasped his frozen hands and gave him a determined smile.

"I'm not… the naive noblewoman you th-think I am. You must know this by now. I had a rough childhood… and I've journeyed across h-half the continent. Not to mention going through… a t-terrible war as well. This isn't enough to hurt me."

As Riftan's expression darkened and his eyes clouded with pain, Maxi thought that it may have been better to have stayed quiet. He looked as if he was about to say something when there was a knock at the door. Ursuline Ricaydo's voice came through.

"Commander, the king wishes to speak with you before the mediation."

Riftan silently gazed down at Maxi, his eyes full of anguish, before he reluctantly left the room.

"Don't let anyone in."

After giving the stern command to the knights guarding the door, Riftan cut across the hall. Maxi sat before the fireplace and anxiously

waited for the mediation to begin. A second felt like a minute, and a minute felt like an hour. Weighed down by the fraught tension, she began biting her nails when there was another knock.

"My lady, the mediation has begun."

"P-Please give me a minute."

Maxi examined her reflection in the mirror. She still looked elegant despite a few stray hairs sticking out from the braid coiled around her head. Maxi draped her cloak over her shoulders and stepped out of the room.

"Where is Riftan?"

"He has gone ahead to the assembly room with His Majesty," Ursuline replied as he led her to the stairs in the center of the hall. "Please do not worry. Charon and I will enter with you."

"Who else… will be joining us?"

"About ten people from the king's retinue, attendants, and guards… and the duke will probably bring five or six people with him."

It was a relief to learn that there would be fewer people than she had anticipated. The sheer number of men her father had brought with him had been intimidating.

The knights led her to an assembly room on the second floor. Maxi nervously glanced around as they entered. King Reuben sat like an imposing judge at one end of the spacious room. Princess Agnes and the earl stood at his right and left respectively, both wearing grave expressions.

Riftan and the Duke of Croyso sat at opposite ends of a long table. They had their heads turned away in a blatant refusal to even look each other in the eye. The icy atmosphere petrified Maxi. Seeing her frozen to the spot, Elliot led her to her place behind Riftan.

"This way, my lady."

Maxi sank into one of the chairs that lined the wall. As Elliot and Ursuline took their seats on either side of her, the king looked up from the roll of parchment he was reading.

"Are all concerned parties now present?"

Propping his elbow on the armrest, King Reuben rested his chin crookedly on one hand and waved the parchment with his other.

"I was just re-reading the lengthy case sent by the Duke of Croyso. The duke claims that our most favored knight did something heinous last fall."

An amused smile tugged at the king's lips as he mockingly scanned the parchment.

"To summarize, he claims that the champion of Wedon broke into his castle and attempted to murder him."

Ursuline shot to his feet in anger, but the king continued speaking before the knight could say anything.

"Around the same time, you, Calypse, declared an unlawful war on the duke. It eludes me why one of you is raving about a war, while the other is dead set on a trial. Do shed some light on what exactly transpired."

"Your Majesty! We are not here to discuss that man's d-declaration of war!" the duke protested, his lips trembling. His face flushed with agitation. "That beast of a man… is guilty of trespassing and assault! I was at death's door for four days despite immediate treatment by a high priest. I barely survived. You must pronounce judgment on the man who dared to lay a hand on a high-ranking noble! Your Majesty, it is the least you can do for your subject who has been loyal to you all his life."

Unable to contain himself, Ursuline cried out, "Your Majesty! The duke's claims are biased and misleading!"

An official went to reprimand the knight for his insolence when the king raised his hand, cutting him off. He then bobbed his head, prompting Ursuline on.

Ignoring Riftan's silent warning, Ursuline knelt before the king. His explanation seemed to tumble out all at once.

"The reason we went to Croyso Castle that day was to see Lady Calypse. Though he had no right to do so, the duke had confined her ladyship. He refused us entry. What man would do nothing if his wife was taken from him? Our commander had no choice but to break in and bring back Lady Calypse. Strictly speaking, it is the duke who has committed the offense."

"H-How dare you… spout lies before the king?!" the duke bellowed, slamming the table. "You accuse me of locking up my

daughter?! All I did was allow my own child to stay at my castle. Is that a crime? Her Highness is my witness! Did you not see my daughter chose to return to Croyso Castle of her own accord?!”

“Cease this assault on our ears,” King Reuben muttered with a frown. “We are not here to argue about who’s at fault. The reason I have come all this way is to personally hear your explanations and to offer a resolution. Do consider my efforts, and stop shouting at each other.”

The duke pressed his lips together, disgruntled at the reprimand. King Reuben appeared to be lost in thought for a moment before he continued.

“Unfortunately, Lord Croyso, I must agree with Sir Ursuline. A woman is the property of her husband. You had no right to prevent Calypse from meeting his wife when he requested it.”

“Your Majesty, I was merely trying to protect my daughter,” the duke said with astounding sincerity.

Thus far, Riftan had managed to maintain a calm, silent demeanor. As soon as he heard the duke’s lie, his expression grew cold.

“Did you just say…” he said, shooting daggers at the duke, “you were protecting her?”

The duke seemed to freeze at Riftan’s menacing look. His face grew ashen, and he flinched as though confronted with a nightmarish monster.

“My daughter was abandoned at Drachium Castle after suffering a miscarriage.” The duke jerked his head toward the king and began his appeal. “I reacted as any father would! I was only trying to protect her from the endless court gossip and my son-in-law’s neglect.”

“What brazen lies!”

Both Ursuline and Elliot shot to their feet, murderous looks across both of their faces. They exuded such a threatening aura that the royal knights drew their swords.

“Settle down! You are in the presence of the king!”

The two knights begrudgingly took their seats. The king exhaled loudly as he shifted in his chair, then turned his apathetic eyes on a petrified Maxi.

"It appears that you are at the center of all this. What is your opinion on their claims?"

"Your Majesty, my wife—"

"I was addressing your wife, Calypse. Not you."

Riftan grew stone-still after the king's dismissal. Glancing at Riftan first, Maxi forced a smile and rose from her chair. Her fingers trembled faintly under her father's ferocious gaze. Trying to shake off her trepidation, she gripped her dress and stood straighter.

"M-My father…" Maxi gulped and willed her voice to stop shaking, "did not prevent me from seeing my husband for my protection. My father… was only concerned about the shame that would befall the family if I were to be divorced. And if I am being honest, Your Majesty, I briefly shared his fears. I was too ashamed to face my husband… a-and the fear of being denounced foolishly made me follow my father. But when my husband came to Croyso Castle…"

Maxi's voice cracked. She paused and flicked a glance at Riftan. Her breath hitched when she saw his face drained of color, and she was overcome with a desire to drag him from the room and clutch him to her chest. She wet her parched lips.

"I-I… wanted to speak with him, but my father did not allow it. And when I tried to go against his wishes…" She hesitated before willing herself to continue. "My father locked me in a room and subjected me to harsh, c-corporal punishment. My husband… was enraged when he saw this."

"You dare…"

Veins stood stark on the duke's neck. He opened his mouth as if to unleash obscenities before clamping it shut. The muscles of his jaw twitched as though he was forcing a fireball down his throat. To the duke, this was no different than if his slave had rebelled against him, the master. Disbelief was etched across his face.

Maxi stared at the floor to avoid his vicious gaze. After a moment of silence, the king spoke.

"It seems we now have a rough understanding of what transpired."

He leaned back against his fur-laden chair and drew out a sigh.

"Lord Croyso, if this is true, then you are not completely blameless either. Maximilian Calypse belongs to Riftan Calypse. You lost all authority over your daughter the moment they were wed. It wasn't your place to confine her, or to inflict physical punishment."

"That child is embellishing events in a shameless ploy to defend her husband! The only reason I was against her meeting him, and meted out mild corporal punishment, was to protect her future and the reputation of my house! When I found my daughter alone at the royal palace, I thought that Calypse was planning to abandon her. Is doing my best to protect my daughter from further pain such a crime?"

Maxi was utterly fed up with her father's brazenness. He spoke so assuredly without a hint of shame that it made her wonder if he truly believed what he was saying.

The duke raised his chin in a proud tilt. "I will not deny… that I may have overreacted at the time. And if you must hold me accountable, I am willing to pay the required fine. But I have no intention of forgiving that man no matter what you say, Your Majesty."

It must have been a deep-seated hatred that gave the duke the courage to look at his adversary then. He turned his head and stared straight into Riftan's blazing eyes.

"No matter the reason, Riftan Calypse's actions were out of order. If he was so displeased that I prevented him from seeing my daughter, or that I disciplined her to correct her manners, then he could have voiced his concerns there and then. Instead, what did he choose to do? He… attempted to kill me on the spot! Not only that, but he even had the audacity to threaten me with military force. W-Who in their right mind would do such a thing? You must make him step down as the commander of the Remdragon Knights, strip him of his knighthood, and confiscate his land!"

Maxi clutched her forehead as she listened to her father's bellowing. Elliot, his face as pale as hers, moved to steady her as she teetered. The only person who appeared calm was Riftan. His face was impassive as though he had expected nothing less from the duke.

Chapter 187

Riftan's reaction sent a chill through Maxi. The only time he became frighteningly calm like this was when his anger was at a tipping point. She worried that he might launch himself at the duke.

Princess Agnes had so far stayed silent throughout the proceedings. She now cried out as though she could not contain herself any longer.

"What unreasonable demands! Sir Riftan is indisputably an honorable knight. He is the hero who risked his life to fight in the Dragon Campaign in your stead, Lord Croyso! If you were to make him stand before the tribunal, it would only earn you the ridicule of the whole continent."

The duke's face flushed crimson. He directed an icy glare at the princess and said, "That man entered my castle by stealth and assaulted me while I was unarmed. I doubt I would be the only one condemned…"

The duke's scheming eyes flew back to Riftan.

"Even if I were, it wouldn't matter," he spat through clenched teeth. "I will make him stand trial for his crimes. Nothing will convince me otherwise."

"You don't know when to stop talking, do you?"

Riftan had been watching the duke's determined face. As he finally broke his silence, he unfolded his arms and leaned over the table. The action reminded Maxi of a predator flattening itself before it pounced.

The duke visibly recoiled. Riftan took a moment to observe the duke's reaction with derision before muttering in an ominously gentle voice, "I have always admired your ability to come up with the most believable excuses. Why don't you just be honest? Tell them that you are terrified of me."

"Y-You insolent— What nonsense!"

The corner of Riftan's lips twisted scornfully. "You were scared out of your wits by my declaration of war, and you probably thought you would never regain your peace of mind unless you had my fiefdom taken from me. But you are mistaken. If I am no longer bound by pledges or treaties, I'll be free to show you just how deranged I really am."

Icy silence fell over the assembly room. Ignoring his stunned audience, Riftan slowly drove his point home like a tiger cornering its prey.

"I have a knack for sneaking into places. And you cannot even begin to imagine the unspeakable things I did as a mercenary. Do you know what that means? It means that the fear of not knowing whether each night could be your last will never allow you to rest peacefully. When you open your eyes in the morning, the first thing you'll do is to check that your head is still attached to your neck. Whenever you leave your castle, you'll seek out the corners where I might be hiding, lying in wait to ambush you. If you're prepared to live like that for the rest of your life…"

Riftan fixed his gaze on the duke as his words sunk in. He slowly added, "Then, by all means, do as you wish."

"H-How dare… you make such deplorable threats!"

The duke shot to his feet, his face white with terror. His lanky body shook as though he had been struck by lightning.

Shaking his finger at Riftan, the duke cried out, "Did you hear him, Your Majesty? Did you hear what this low-born just said? How can such a ruffian be called an honorable knight and a hero?! He is a dangerous madman! We need not bother with a trial. You must strip him of his knighthood this instant and have him hanged for insulting a nobleman!"

"Silence!"

King Reuben's regal voice boomed across the assembly room that now sounded more like a madhouse. He rubbed his temples and drew out a heavy sigh.

"Did you make me rush down here to watch this circus?"

"Your Majesty! Are you still trying to defend this man after what he just said? If you do not punish him immediately—"

"Enough! If you interrupt me again, I will have you punished for contempt of the monarchy."

The duke shot Riftan an aggrieved look before begrudgingly taking his seat. Only then did the king turn his stern gaze on Riftan.

"Calypse, your behavior is simply unacceptable. Regardless of how angry you are, you cannot make such appalling threats as a knight. Such declarations will do nothing for your cause."

"Didn't that man just proclaim that he will not be withdrawing his case? If that's so, why should I be mindful of my words?" Riftan's tone was bland as he leaned back in his chair. "If I lost my knighthood, I would no longer be a knight. Thus no longer bound by the code of chivalry. And mercenaries have their own rule: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

Just as King Reuben had managed to pacify the room, uproars erupted over the audience once more. The duke bellowed his outrage, denouncing Riftan for his vile threats, while Ursuline retaliated by condemning the duke for initiating.

Even the ever-decorous Elliot launched criticisms at the duke. When the Croyso knights joined the shouting match, the room truly was no different from the circus the king had described it as. Such a bitter, heated atmosphere was not what Maxi had been expecting, and she recoiled from the noise.

Having reached the end of his patience, the king leaped to his feet.

"You insolent fools! Must I upend a pail over your heads for you to come to your senses?! Have you forgotten whose presence you are in?!"

He slammed a fist on the table. Maxi worried that he was so fed up with his vassals' insolence that he might storm off. However, in a display of admirable patience, King Reuben walked over to the window and looked up at the pale winter sky. He appeared much calmer when he turned around.

"It seems we cannot have a civilized conversation with both of you in the room. I will speak to each of you alone. Calypse, you will be first."

The king turned his sharp gaze on the duke.

"Lord Croyso, you are to wait in the adjacent room. I would be grateful if you try to collect yourself."

Obeying the king's commands, everyone except Riftan rose from their seats. The duke exited the room first with his four knights and a cleric, and Maxi and Ursuline followed suit. She could not tear her eyes away from Riftan's back even as the door closed. The situation was becoming far more serious than she had anticipated.

Her father's determination to bring Riftan to trial was stronger than she had ever thought possible. Riftan showed no intention of backing down. In fact, he did not seem inclined to defend himself at all.

Maxi gnawed her lip. If the king failed to bring about a resolution, there would be a trial at Drachium Castle within a few months. Would Riftan stand a chance of winning? After pacing the length of the corridor, Maxi went after the duke. The flustered knights tried to dissuade her.

"My lady, you mustn't. There is no point in talking to such a man."

"I-It won't take long. I just… h-have something I wish to say."

She pushed past the knights and ran after her father. The duke, marching ahead shielded by his men, came to a halt. His cold eyes flew to her. Even an insect crawling on the floor would not have received such an icy look.

"You dare show your face to me?" the duke snarled.

Maxi took a deep breath to dispel her terror. Her father could not harm her anymore. She was no longer a Croyso — she was a Calypse. Repeating this in her head, Maxi spoke calmly.

"Please… withdraw your case."

The duke scoffed as though he found the request so preposterous he could not even be bothered to be angry.

Maxi quickly added, "Even if you go ahead with the trial… th-there is nothing to gain. Rather… you have much to lose. It will strain your relationship… with the royal family and earn you the scorn of the nobles. And… if you insist on putting my husband on trial… I-I will testify in his defense. I will… expose all the cruelty I suffered at your hands… a-and have you charged!"

Her father's eyes burned with an all-consuming rage. Maxi willed her trembling legs to stay still. She could not believe that she was standing up to him, right to his face.

The fear that his cane might come flying at her made her back prickle with cold sweat. Despite this, Maxi mustered all the courage she could and stared directly into his ruthless eyes. There was a moment of suffocating silence. Finally, her father spoke.

"Do as you wish."

Maxi flinched at his surprising calmness. The duke's lips twisted into a mocking smile.

"Do you truly think anyone would bother listening to what you have to say? Cruelty? Ha! And how do you intend to prove it? The world will only see you as the daughter who framed her own father to defend her husband."

Maxi's eyes darted over the Croyso knights surrounding them. The sight of their unfeeling expressions plunged her into despair. As vassals of the House of Croyso, these men would never defy her father to take her side. She doubted even her nursemaid would be willing.

The duke gave a derisive click of his tongue. "Let's suppose the impossible and say that they did believe you. Do you really think it would affect the trial? All I did was discipline my child properly. Only God knows the effort I put in to fix that atrocious impediment of yours."

Maxi was left speechless by her father's shamelessness. She simply could not believe her ears.

"Are you saying… that everything you did was for my sake?"

The duke raised his chin. "Why would I have bothered to have you treated each time if my intention was abuse? I always made sure that you were left with no scars. All of that was for but one reason — to mend you."

Maxi opened her mouth to argue, but she was so stunned that she could not think of anything to say. A hollow laugh was all she could manage.

How could he claim that everything had been for her sake when he had ravaged her life with anguish and pain? The duke watched

her lips tremble with a look of contempt before he landed his next blow like a hammer on a nail.

"I bent over backward trying to make you normal. A parent raising a hand against their child in the name of discipline could never be considered a criminal."

"W-Would that still apply after I married Riftan? Y-You had no right… to put your hands on me, even if you are my father!" Maxi yelled, no longer able to contain the anger surging up inside her.

The duke scowled and shook his head as if he found it laughable.

"Do you truly think kicking up a fuss will make a difference? If charges are laid, I would only be slapped with a fine. Your husband, however, would have to pay more than that for his transgressions."

Evidently at the end of his tether, Elliot grabbed the hilt of his sword and stepped forward. Although Maxi was just as incensed, she moved to stop him. There would be no turning back if blades were drawn. She gathered the last of her composure and glared at her father.

"E-Even if you were to be spared just punishment… it wouldn't matter. I will still expose all of your disgraceful a-actions. I'm certain that many will denounce your hypocrisy. A-And even that lofty reputation of your house you care so much about… will be muddied. Are you sure… you'll be able to bear the disgrace? Is your revenge… really worth the sacrifice?"

Maxi could almost hear her father grinding his teeth. He gripped his cane as if steeling himself to strike, and the knights stepped forward protectively.

The duke glared at them in disdain and hissed, "By all means, let's see what you can do! Tarnish your father's reputation, make a mockery of yourself! It would certainly be a spectacle worth watching."

The duke spun and entered the waiting room. Unable to face the knights, Maxi squeezed her eyes shut. She was ashamed of her abhorrent father, of her powerlessness, and above all, of dragging Riftan into this ditch with her. She hung her head and continued down the dark corridor.

The king spoke privately to the Duke of Croyso after his audience with Riftan. Then, with both of them present, the mediation carried on late into the night.

Chapter 188

Maxi paced around the waiting room and fervently prayed for a miracle. Judging by the occasional shouts that filtered through, it did not seem they would be answered.

Anxiously gnawing her lip, she imagined her father using absurd sophistry to frame Riftan. It set her nerves on edge just thinking about it.

She cracked the door open and peeked down the dark corridor. They were in the furthest room. Since King Reuben had prohibited third parties from participating in the mediation, there was no way of knowing how it was progressing. Maxi continued stewing in anxiety and pacing the length of the room when Ursuline spoke. Until then, the knight had been quietly leaning against the wall.

"I don't think they will be calling you for further testimony, my lady. Why don't you return to your chambers to rest?"

Ruth jerked his head up from where he had been dozing before the fireplace. "Yes. Let us return to our rooms. Sitting here won't help anyone."

"At least a shred of concern from you would be nice…" Ursuline said with a disapproving frown. He heaved a sigh. "But the sorcerer has a point. The talks won't end anytime soon, so I suggest you get some sleep, my lady. They might go on through the night at this rate."

"D-Do you mean all night long?"

When Maxi's eyes grew wide in surprise, the knight gave her a bitter smile.

"It is a tactic the king frequently uses to bring unruly subjects to heel. His Majesty is as robust as any knight. He's able to tire most opponents into submission."

"Don't worry too much, my lady," Elliot chipped in optimistically. "The king is fully capable of dragging out this mediation for two

whole nights, and so is our commander. The Duke of Croyso will be forced to give in soon."

Maxi sighed at their naivety. They clearly knew nothing about the duke.

Her father's tenacity was second to none. Two nights? He would scream obscenities until he coughed up blood if he were told to do so. It occurred to Maxi that the king might have given her father the opportunity to do just that. It was obvious that the duke would be eagerly vilifying Riftan, letting loose a deluge of slander against him.

Maxi rubbed her throbbing temples. Seeing this, Ursuline grabbed the cloak on the wall.

"Let me escort you to your chambers, my lady."

He opened the door with a determined look that said he would make sure she rested regardless of her answer.

Although she was certain that she would not be able to sleep, she was still exhausted from being on edge the whole day. Thinking that she ought to lie down even for a short while, Maxi resignedly agreed.

She was about to leave when she saw a faint light flickering at the end of the corridor. Maxi paused at the door. Princess Agnes was heading toward them with the royal mage, Simon. Realizing who they were, Ruth crept into the corner as if fleeing from a plague. Ursuline watched him with a disparaging look before stepping forward to address the princess.

"Your Highness, what brings you here at this hour?"

"There is something I wish to discuss," said Princess Agnes, her anxious gaze flying to Maxi. "Can you spare me a moment?"

Maxi hesitated before stepping back into the room. The princess let out a sigh of relief at Maxi's silent invitation and entered with Simon.

Maxi nervously studied the princess's grim expression. A fire crackled on one side of the waiting room, while Ruth, Elliot, Ursuline, and two other members of the Remdragon Knights stood at the other end.

Princess Agnes's gaze swept over their faces before landing on Maxi. In all the time Maxi had known her, she had never seen the

princess look so exhausted. Her blue eyes appeared conflicted.

When the princess showed no sign that she would speak first, Maxi asked, "H-Has… something happened?"

"This might take a while. Can we sit?"

The hairs on Maxi's nape stood on end at the hesitation in the princess's voice. Managing to calm her nerves, she led the princess to the table. The knights waiting on the sidelines promptly pulled chairs out for them.

"Thank you."

The princess gave a strained smile and sat down. Maxi clenched her skirt as she took the seat opposite. She glanced at Simon, silently standing behind the princess, and wondered why he was here.

"I apologize for being unable to stop things from getting this far," said Princess Agnes. "I did everything I could, but the duke's influence is truly formidable. Every noble who held any position at court took his side."

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, then heaved a sigh.

"I think he's already managed to bribe most of them. We won't be able to do anything if this goes to trial."

"Y-You promised to… support Riftan i-if the duke put pressure on Anatol," Maxi desperately reminded the princess.

The princess's expression grew troubled, and there was a touch of a plea in her voice as she spoke.

"I understand how it must look to you, but I assure you, His Majesty and I are doing our best to protect Riftan. The royal family must always stay impartial. We cannot ignore the nobles' demands and take Riftan's side without sufficient justification. It's why we called this mediation so urgently before it goes to a formal trial."

"The commander's actions were justifiable," Ursuline interjected. "The Duke of Croyso harmed the commander's wife. If I may put it plainly, shouldn't he be grateful that we didn't demand retribution?"

"That's a knight's logic. The nobles do not see it that way."

The princess placed her hands on the table and clasped them together. She seemed to take a moment to find the right words

before she spoke again.

"I'm sure you're aware that a woman does not have all that much legal standing. Practically none, in fact. A daughter is her father's property, and a wife is her husband's. Even if the duke physically harmed you… if you are unable to prove that the abuse was life-threatening, the duke would only be required to pay a measly compensation. On the other hand, a knight breaking into a castle and attempting to murder its lord is a much more serious crime."

"That's preposterous!" exclaimed Elliot, sounding uncharacteristically exasperated. "None of this would have happened if it weren't for the duke! Are you saying that we should have done nothing after witnessing such an atrocity?"

Princess Agnes bobbed her head to show that she understood. "I don't think that Riftan has done anything wrong either, but a trial is a battle of who is more right. Even if we scoured the laws of Wedon and Roem combined, the facts are not in Riftan's favor. Moreover, the duke has gathered more witnesses and has a legion of nobles backing him. If we fail to stop this trial, we won't be able to prevent the nobles from stripping Riftan of his knighthood."

The room seemed to spin around Maxi. Her ears ringing, she hung her head in despair. Elliot's agitated voice sounded distant in her dazed state.

"Then why did you stop us from waging war against the duke? Dealing with him with force would have been better! How could the royal family treat the commander like—"

"Elliot! That's enough," Ursuline reprimanded with a stern look. "Did you not hear Her Highness? The royal family is doing their best!"

Unable to contain his anger, Elliot glared defiantly back. "Whose side are you on, Sir Ursuline?! This whole thing is ludicrous. Why should our commander lose his knighthood because of that snake?! You know as well as anyone how dedicated Sir Riftan is to Anatol. We can't allow them to snatch away the lands he has poured his blood, sweat, and tears into for the past decade. We should go ahead with the war as we originally intended!"

Elliot's face was flushed with anger. Before Ursuline could say anything, the princess spoke with an imploring tone.

"I understand your anger, but I ask that you spare a moment to listen to what I have to say."

Grasping at a shred of hope, Maxi looked at the princess. "D-Do you… have a s-solution in mind?"

"We must make the duke withdraw his case. That is the only possible solution," the princess replied, her eyes bright with determination.

Her resolute demeanor sent a chill down Maxi's spine. The princess held Maxi's gaze for a long time, as if peering into her innermost thoughts, before continuing.

"We can only win by overturning the crux of the duke's defense. And to do so, we need you to make a decision, Maximilian."

Maxi looked baffled. Was the princess asking her to testify for Riftan during the trial? Had she not just explained that it would not be enough to point to the duke's violence as a justification for his assault? Maxi urged the princess to continue.

"If there is anything I can do… I would be happy to. Please tell me exactly w-what I must do."

The princess hesitated before she answered.

"I intend to get the Mage Tower involved."

Maxi's eyes widened, and Ruth let out a snort.

"And how exactly are you going to do that? The Tower strictly maintains its neutrality. It is their rule not to interfere with the internal affairs of the Seven Kingdoms, no matter the situation."

The princess gave Ruth a disparaging glare as if to tell him that he had no right to make such comments. She sighed and said, "There is one thing that would prompt them to step in."

"What are you—"

Ruth stopped mid-scoff and gaped as realization dawned on him.

"No… you're not planning on recruiting her ladyship to the Mage Tower, are you?"

This time, even the knights grew wide-eyed. Maxi was about to chide Ruth for his nonsensical comment when the princess nodded.

"If Maximilian were to become a pupil of the Tower, we can charge the duke with mage persecution. Nornui takes protecting its mages very seriously. If there is a trial, they will send a representative to investigate. The moment the claims of physical harm are corroborated, not a single mage will remain in the duke's service."

"B-But… But…" Maxi stammered, unable to follow the rapid developments. "I-I don't understand… Even if… I was to register with the Tower now… the incident… has already occurred. Can we still accuse the duke of mage persecution… w-when the assault happened earlier?"

The princess shook her head. "No, but I intend to falsify the record to show that you registered last spring. The story is that the last time I visited Anatol, I urged you to register as a mage of the Tower, and you agreed."

"B-But…"

At a loss for words, Maxi turned to Ruth with a disconcerted look. She still remembered what he had told her about the Mage Tower's training regimen.

"I-I heard that one is required… to study at N-Nornui for four years… to become a mage. My father is aware th-that I've never been there. I've only spent a year in Anatol… and before then, I'd never left Croyso Castle."

Simon broke his silence as Maxi finished her point.

"A good deal of people register first before entering Nornui to begin their studies." Without bothering to ask permission, he took the seat next to the princess and continued calmly, "It won't be difficult coming up with a reason to explain your late entry. We can say that you registered last spring at Princess Agnes's recommendation. Although you intended to depart immediately, the monster army invaded, so you decided to delay your studies to offer what assistance you could."

"Can she still receive the Tower's protection without formal training?" Ursuline asked.

The princess nodded. "One receives Nornui's protection the moment they register. They have assured me that they will turn a blind eye to the falsified date."

The conversation seemed to be spiraling out of control. Maxi almost felt steam shooting from her ears as she tried to keep up. She looked over the participants' faces one by one — the princess's determination, Simon's calmness, and Ruth's stoniness.

"Th-Then… does that…?"

Her throat felt gritty as if she had swallowed sand. She willed the words out of her mouth.

"Does that mean… I'll have to go to Nornui?"

The princess's face fell slightly. She stroked the edges of her lip before giving a reluctant nod. "Yes, for at least three to four years… As a rule, one is expected to begin their training as soon as possible after registering."

Elliot spoke when he noticed Maxi standing frozen.

"Could we not just leave it at registering her ladyship's name? The commander would never agree to Lady Calypse being away from Anatol for that long."

"The Mage Tower has its own rules, and those who register must abide by them. There are no exceptions."

Ruth winced and backed away. After shooting him a glare, Princess Agnes rubbed her forehead. She sounded deflated as she continued speaking.

"Moreover, it would fail to convince the duke. That man will no doubt start another case the moment he learns he's been duped. By then, he might also include a charge of deceiving a high-ranking noble."

Chapter 189

Feeling trapped, Maxi wet her parched lips. The thought of leaving Riftan's side made her stomach twist into knots. As she struggled to answer, Ruth snapped out of his silent deliberation.

"Your Highness, we understand where you're coming from, but this is all quite sudden. Once her ladyship becomes a mage of the Tower, she must spend years at Nornui without contact with the outside world. It's a matter that requires much consideration. Please, give her some time to think it over."

"I would if that were possible, but who knows when the duke might take off for the duchy? That man was forced to come here at the king's behest. He likely intends to leave as soon as protocol permits."

Not knowing what else to do, Maxi cast her eyes to the floor. Although she had told the princess that she would do anything for Riftan, she found it difficult to agree to this suggestion so readily. Seeing her hesitate, Ruth scowled at the princess.

"I'm sure you can keep him here for at least a few days! This is not something you can coerce someone into. It's not only Sir Riftan's future that's at stake, but her ladyship's as well."

The princess furrowed her brow as if offended.

"I understand," she said, nodding. Then she sighed. "Please consider it during the mediation."

Princess Agnes and Simon rose from their seats. Maxi found herself unable to utter a single word until they were out of the room. It felt as though she was on a tightrope, fighting to keep her balance.

Ursuline studied Maxi's blanched face as he spoke. "You are free to refuse, my lady."

When Maxi's eyes widened, the knight added somberly, "The commander will probably be against it. The truth is… he is already

preparing to leave Wedon."

"D-Does he… plan on defecting?" Maxi asked, her mouth agape.

Ursuline nodded slowly. "The commander has no intention of ever standing trial. If the arbitration fails, he plans to set off to Livadon with you immediately."

"Th-Then… what about Anatol a-and the Remdragon Knights?"

"Many of the knights intend to follow. Frankly, everyone wants to defect with him, but some are in circumstances that won't allow them to leave. The order will likely split into two."

Maxi flinched and glanced at Ruth, Elliot, and the knights silently standing guard by the door. They all appeared as calm as though they were already aware of the plans. Riftan had likely informed them in advance. Maxi was so stunned that she sank into the chair.

"I am not telling you this to burden you," Ursuline quickly added. "We still don't know how this mediation will end. We merely planned for the worst."

"Th-Then, if the talks fail…" Maxi mumbled in a daze. "Riftan… will lose Anatol and his knights… He would lose everything."

The knights' mouths set into grim lines, and the air in the room turned gloomy.

Out of nowhere, Ruth gripped Maxi's shoulders. "My lady, I know my saying this is useless… but you should try and get some sleep for now. This is not a decision you should make in haste. Entering the Mage Tower means that you will have to live as a mage for the rest of your life. You must be certain that you want to take this on, so you ought to mull it over with a clear head before making any decisions."

Maxi looked up at him through her tear-filled vision before bobbing her head. Ursuline helped her up and led her out of the room.

As she followed him down the dark corridor, Maxi struggled to organize her muddled thoughts. The story she recalled from a bard's song refused to leave her mind. It spoke of mages of antiquity who created an island in the middle of the sea to escape the heathen hunters. There they built a colossal tower.

Coming face-to-face with the story of legend filled her with a nebulous dread. Even back in her room, Maxi could not rest, and she spent the night wrestling with the situation.

It was daybreak when Riftan finally returned to their room. Maxi lay with her back to him, her eyes squeezed shut, pretending to be asleep. She heard rustling fabric before she felt his large frame climb into bed next to her.

She let out a shaky breath. His muscled arm coiled around her waist, pulling her into a tight embrace. Tears burned her eyes at the comforting warmth on her back. She tried to blink them away in the dark.

For the sole reason of being her husband, Riftan currently faced a dilemma that could cost him everything. The person hounding him was her father; did Riftan not resent her for that? If he had divorced her and married the princess after the Dragon Campaign, he would not be in this miserable situation.

And I'm not even worth it… How foolish.

Maxi closed her eyes, her heart breaking. If she were to leave for the Mage Tower, she would not be able to sleep enveloped in these arms for the next few years. Would she be able to endure four years separated from him when a few months apart had been unbearable?

Riftan's voice resonated behind her.

"Don't worry. Everything will work out."

As if knowing she had been awake all along, he turned her around and held her to his chest. He pressed his cheek against the top of her head.

Maxi burrowed herself deeper into his embrace. She wanted to run away with him to some distant land. Would it be so wrong for her to go along with his plans? She could let him give up his knightly status, Anatol, and the order, and leave with her to someplace far away. She shoved down the heart-wrenching sobs that rose in her throat. Being swayed by such temptations was unforgivable.

She could not cling to him forever like a stubborn child. It was her weakness that had caused all this. Her inability to trust, her relentless self-hatred — that was why they were in this situation. If

she were to feign ignorance and do nothing, she would despise herself for the rest of her life.

The next morning, as soon as Riftan left for the assembly room, Maxi went straight to the princess's quarters in the annex. The knights escorted her there. Though Ruth had tried to persuade her to deliberate longer, she was afraid that her resolve would crumble if she did give her answer right away.

Maxi closed her eyes and knocked on the door. When it swung open, the first thing she saw was Princess Agnes's surprised face.

"Have you come to a decision already?" the princess asked cautiously as she ushered Maxi into the room.

Lowering herself into a velvet-upholstered chair, Maxi nodded. "I have decided… to accept. I-I will become a mage of the Tower."

Contrary to Maxi's expectations, the princess looked conflicted rather than pleased.

"I know how laughable this may sound after the way I tried to press you yesterday… But, are you sure? Once you enter, you won't be able to leave the island until you've concluded your training. Communication with the outside world will also be greatly restricted."

When Maxi slowly nodded, Princess Agnes narrowed her eyes as if to gauge her resolve. Finally, she gave a weak smile.

"I know that you have no choice, Maximilian. You may think that I'm being a hypocrite, but I wouldn't have suggested this if I didn't think it would be of some benefit to you as well."

"B-Benefit… me?"

Maxi stared at the princess in disbelief. How on earth would being forced to spend four years apart from her husband benefit her?

Princess Agnes responded to Maxi's glower with a bitter smile. "You have a gift, Maximilian. The quick judgment and improvisation you've shown during crises… It's not something you find often, even among well-trained mages. With the right training, I'm sure you'll become an outstanding mage in a few years. I think it would be a pity to waste your potential solely because you're married."

"Y-You needn't say such things… I have already made up my mind."

"I'm not trying to flatter you," said the princess, frowning. "Joining the Mage Tower is a great honor. I would not have suggested it if I didn't think you were qualified to do so."

The princess haughtily raised her chin. When she noticed Maxi's sunken eyes, she added in a milder voice, "I know how fond you are of each other. I understand that it's heartbreaking for you to be separated from him, but this is an opportunity to stand on your own two feet. I don't want you thinking that you're going solely for Riftan's sake."

Maxi blinked at the princess's conviction.

"I'm sure this affair has enlightened you to how society treats women," continued Princess Agnes, sighing at Maxi's uneasy reaction. "I am no exception. If I had not become a mage, I would've been forced into a political marriage with a feudal lord to solidify Wedon's unity."

The princess's sapphire eyes grew cold.

"Once you join the Mage Tower, neither the duke nor Riftan will be able to force you to do anything against your wishes. You will gain the power to protect yourself."

The princess's emphatic words seemed to reverberate through Maxi's heart. If it were not for her all-consuming grief, the speech would have won her over. There had been a time when she had wanted nothing more than to become a confident mage worthy of admiration like the princess.

Right now, she was too miserable to feel any excitement. She felt as dazed as if she had been hit over the head with an iron mace. Another part of her felt like she was being coerced. Maxi helplessly shook her head.

"P-Preventing the trial… is the only thing I can think about right now. My mind sadly has no room for anything else."

"I understand," the princess replied, nodding readily. "For now, let's focus on getting the duke to surrender. We can think about the rest in time."

They rose from their seats after coordinating their story. Outside, Ursuline and Elliot eyed Maxi with concern. After giving them the

most reassuring smile she could muster, she made her way to the main building with the princess.

The third session of the mediation was underway in the same room. They strained their ears in front of the arched doorway in the hopes of discerning how it was progressing. The duke's voice blared from the other side.

"If Your Majesty looks past such an unprecedented act of impudence, every noble in the kingdom will rise in protest! Do you intend on betraying your vassals who have been nothing but loyal? All for a low-born knight?!"

It was a blatant threat. Maxi's face grew red with anger at her father's jab at Riftan. The princess stared up at the ceiling as if to summon her self-control, then addressed the attendant at the door with imperious authority.

"I have something to report to His Majesty. Please inform him that I seek his permission to enter the assembly room."

"Right away, Your Highness. One moment."

The young attendant cautiously opened the door and disappeared into the room. A moment later, he returned and motioned for them to enter.

Maxi tentatively followed Princess Agnes and Simon. Riftan was seated at the table, and his look of irritation turned to surprise when he saw Maxi. She avoided his gaze and stuck close to the princess.

Princess Agnes slowly approached the king and addressed him formally. "Please forgive me for interrupting the mediation, Your Majesty."

"No need to apologize. It was becoming quite tedious listening to the same thing over and over."

The duke's face contorted at the king's blasé comment.

King Reuben yawned indifferently and added, "We were told that you have something to report. You have permission to speak freely."

"There is a matter about which you are not yet aware, Your Majesty. I did not bring it to your attention earlier as it was not something I could choose to reveal on my own. Thankfully, Lady Calypse has come to a decision. She can no longer stand by and

allow this to continue. It's why we sought an audience with you in all haste."

The princess paused for a moment to look at the steely-faced Riftan and the duke in turn. King Reuben raised a bushy brow and rested his chin in his hand.

"Get to the point. I detest long preambles."

The princess straightened and turned an icy gaze on the duke. "Then I shall cut to the chase, Your Majesty. The duke claims that his actions were mild corporal punishment, but Lady Calypse does not agree. She has informed me that, if the duke insists on going ahead with the trial, she will lodge a complaint of physical violence with the Mage Tower."

The princess's voice rang through the room. The duke, who had been listening with a vacant expression, shot to his feet.

"That is absurd! What does the Mage Tower have to do with this?"

Simon answered on behalf of the princess. "Why wouldn't they have anything to do with this? Protecting its mages is Nornui's greatest concern. If you recall, the foremost reason behind its establishment was to protect mages from persecution."

Both the duke and Riftan looked stupefied. Paying no attention to their reactions, Simon turned to the king and calmly continued.

"Maximilian Calypse registered with Nornui last spring, and as such, any violence against her is considered persecution of a mage. The moment she requests the Tower's protection, Nornui will immediately launch an investigation into the matter. The duke will be made to answer for his crimes if the claims are proven true."

"What nonsense!"

The duke slammed the table in exasperation and glared murderously at both Maxi and the princess.

"A mage? Ha! To think you'd concoct such an outlandish lie to protect this ruffian! I fear that you are not in your right mind, Your Highness!"

Chapter 190

Even the ever-languid King Reuben grew stony at the duke's flagrant disrespect of the princess. A dangerous glint shone in his golden-brown eyes as he looked down at his vassal.

"It seems you hold me in the lowest regard, Lord Croyso." The king sat upright in his chair, an intimidating smile stretched on his face. "Have you forgotten that the person you insult is my daughter? I came here with an open mind, intending to listen to all of your complaints… but my patience wears thin."

The duke immediately collected himself, though his eyes still burned with animosity. "It seems I misspoke in anger, Your Majesty. Nevertheless, I find the princess's claim hard to believe. Everyone knows that she shares a close friendship with this scoundrel. I cannot help but suspect that she is lying to protect him."

Acid dripped from the duke's words. He turned his contemptuous gaze on Maxi.

"Though it pains me to say this about my own child, my daughter is feeble-minded. How could she have become a mage of the Mage Tower just six seasons after leaving the duchy? A donkey would have a greater chance of becoming a warhorse!"

Riftan's face twisted viciously as he shot to his feet. The duke recoiled, seemingly fearful of an attack then and there. Ignoring the two royal knights who stepped in to restrain him, Riftan kept a murderous look fixed on the duke.

The princess deliberately raised her voice to shatter the tension. "If you doubt me, I will call on the knights who participated in the Livadon Campaign to stand witness. Not only did Maximilian serve as a healer in the coalition army's support unit, but she also played a vital role in the final battle. This is a fact that the soldiers of Livadon, Osiriya, and Balto can vouch for. There are countless people who would gladly corroborate her talent as a mage."

The duke seemed in utter disbelief as he looked Maxi up and down. She hunched her shoulders out of habit before forcing herself to stand straight. There was no reason to be intimidated.

She furtively wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt and met her father's eyes. He could crush a person with his gaze, and he was currently using the full force of his disdain. Maxi could feel her face burning.

As she willed herself to meet his cold eyes, she suddenly realized that he was smaller than she remembered. She blinked. Her father had always seemed far bigger than her, and his scornful looks had always made her feel as minuscule as an ant. However, she now saw that he was only slightly taller than Princess Agnes. His stick-straight, lanky frame was skinnier than she remembered. Compared to a troll or a werewolf, he was practically a scarecrow.

In an instant, the fear that had mushroomed inside her drained away like sand. All that was left was empty bewilderment.

Why had she been so afraid of him? After their reunion, there had been no reason for her to cower before him. She had the means to protect herself now. Her magic could block a Remdragon Knight's blow; her father's cane could not be more powerful than that.

Maxi swept a placid gaze over him. "It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not. I am… a mage. If you insist on putting my husband on trial… I will also use every means available to me to fight it."

Maxi felt Riftan's fierce glare boring into her cheek. Although his eyes glinted dangerously, he kept his mouth firmly shut as if he could not bring himself to call her out on her deception. He seemed inclined to keep his silence for now. Maxi let out a surreptitious sigh of relief when the Duke of Croyso's shrill voice cut through the room.

"You ungrateful wench! Go ahead! Let's see who wins! We'll see who was telling the truth!"

"You cannot be serious." King Reuben, who had been watching the situation unfold with avid interest, heaved a sigh. "Lord Croyso, things will become exceedingly cumbersome for both of us if the Mage Tower gets involved. Do you realize that you are about to be accused of persecuting a mage?"

"How can I be accused if I was not even aware that my daughter was one?!"

"Whether you did it knowingly or unknowingly does not matter," Princess Agnes retorted coldly. "What does is whether physical violence was inflicted."

Simon nodded his agreement. "Her Highness is correct. The events before and after the assault are incidental. The Tower will draw its verdict based solely on whether or not an act of violence was perpetrated."

The duke's face was now almost purple with rage. Amusement rose on the king's face.

"Thus is the quandary, Lord Croyso. You must know how vexing the Mage Tower can be. If they turn their back on you, the majority of the mages in your duchy will leave. It would be futile for you to expect the Tower to ever send any to you again. Are you still going to demand a trial even in the face of such sanctions?"

The duke opened his mouth as if to protest before clenching it shut without a word. Though he was almost foaming with rage, his years as a high-ranking nobleman seemed to hold him in check. He rolled his eyes upward as though trying to calculate the potential losses in the event of this unforeseen scenario.

King Reuben quietly observed the duke. Then, as if to ram his point home, he said, "If you go ahead with this trial, not only will your house lose its prestige, but also many of its high mages. Quite the predicament for you, seeing as you have to keep Dristan at bay. And that's not all. If the Mage Tower decides to move on this, even I will not be able to disregard it."

The duke's face visibly stiffened. "You mean…"

"That Nornui will prevent the royal family from taking your side during the trial."

"Your Majesty, you have a duty to preserve the dignity of your nobles. Are you not concerned about the royal family earning the enmity of all the houses?"

"I grow tired of your threats, Lord Croyso," the king said after a while, his eyes turning cold. "My only wish is to maintain Wedon's unity and safeguard the peace of the Seven Kingdoms. To think that

you would use that against me… *I* cannot help but doubt your loyalty."

"Your Majesty, my life was threatened by the man you personally knighted. To whom would I turn to for justice if not you?"

"Is that not why we have been tolerating your whining thus far?"

The duke's lips turned white with humiliation at the king's irritable response. Seeing this, King Reuben softened his voice.

"I do think that what happened to you was unfortunate. Calypse did go overboard. But having heard both sides, it's clear that it was your actions that instigated it. Calypse will no doubt be condemned by many of the nobles if this goes to trial, but so will you. It will be harder to determine who's at fault if the Mage Tower gets involved. What good will come from taking this further? Would you not be making a mockery of yourself if the verdict does not land as you wish?"

Beside himself with rage, the duke's shoulders shook. He seemed to be in denial that his plan was on the verge of falling apart. His bloodshot eyes darted between Riftan and Maxi.

Maxi was scared that her father would burst into belligerent protests, but the sense of propriety ingrained into his core managed to contain his boiling anger. The duke clenched his jaw in a desperate attempt to collect himself.

It was then that the king made his offer.

"Still, it would be unfair of me to let this matter slide after all you've been through. So, how about this? Allow this affair to pass quietly, and I will halve the dowry you pledged for Rosetta."

The duke's rage was so all-consuming that the king's proposal seemed to fall on deaf ears. He pressed his lips into a thin line, refusing to answer.

"But if you insist on going against my will," the king continued imposingly, "I will be obliged to nullify the engagement between our houses. You cannot expect me to link the royal family with a disloyal vassal."

With that, the duke was left with no choice. He clutched his cane with so much force that it was surprising it did not splinter.

"I understand," the duke said, forcing the words from his mouth as though vomiting blood. "I shall… withdraw my suit… as Your Majesty wishes."

Maxi exhaled the breath she had been holding. Though she had acknowledged it with her own ears, she still could not believe that her father had caved.

After glaring at Maxi as though he wished to obliterate her, the duke excused himself and left with his retainers. It suddenly dawned on Maxi — it was truly over. Though it was still too early for her to relax completely, her shoulders sagged with relief.

Riftan had been watching everything play out as if it were a stage comedy. As he slowly approached to her right, Maxi's whole body stiffened. He grabbed her arm and turned to look at the king.

"It appears that we are done here. We will now take our leave, Your Majesty."

"You may do as you wish," the king replied flatly, slouching wearily in his chair. "Have you any idea how worried we were that you would kill the duke? I think I lost five years of my life through this whole ordeal. I do not wish to see your face for a while."

"In accordance with His Majesty's wishes, I will steer clear of the capital for the next few years."

"You insolent brat." The king's lips twisted into a crooked smile, and he slowly shook his head. "I'm glad we didn't end up losing you over this. I suppose we have you to thank for this unexpected turn of events, Maximilian Calypse."

Maxi floundered, unsure of how to respond, before executing a hasty bow. King Reuben half-heartedly flicked his wrist, excusing Maxi from royal protocols. Riftan promptly steered her out of the assembly room.

Sensing the tension between the couple, Princess Agnes cautiously followed them. They walked in icy silence for a long time. It was only as they got to their chambers that Riftan finally spoke.

"Whose idea was this?"

Chapter 191

Both Maxi and Princess Agnes froze at Riftan's threatening tone. He leaned against the table, shooting daggers at them.

"Cat got your tongue? You both prattled on quite smoothly back there. I'll ask again, whose damned idea was this?"

Maxi's shoulders hunched over like a turtle at the warning in Riftan's voice. In the end, it was Princess Agnes who answered with a sigh.

"It was mine. The only way to get the duke to give up on the trial was to threaten him with losses too heavy to bear."

"And that's why… you dragged my wife into this?"

Now that the recipient of his anger was clear, Riftan straightened himself and stalked over to the princess.

"Did anyone solicit your help? Because I don't remember asking."

"If the trial had gone ahead, you would have lost your knighthood and estate. We had no choice."

"And how does that concern you? What right did you have to make such an offer to my wife?!"

Aghast at his extreme impertinence, Maxi clutched the hem of his tunic. "R-Riftan!"

Riftan turned his rage-filled eyes to her. His throat bobbed furiously as though he were holding back a thousand rebukes. He took a step back, appearing to contain himself, and scrubbed at his face.

Finally, he asked in a calmer manner, "What do you intend to do now?"

"The duke has high mages in his service who can communicate with the Mage Tower," the princess replied. "He will probably get them to confirm the authenticity of our claims. The Tower administrators have agreed to corroborate our story, but a thorough

investigation would easily reveal that Maximilian has never officially registered with the Tower. So, before that happens…"

The princess hesitated before continuing gravely, "Maximilian must enter Nornui. Once she's a member of the Mage Tower, the duke will not dig too deeply. And even if he does, they will do all they can to protect her. Their administrators promised me that they would change the date of her registration."

Anticipating Riftan's outburst, Maxi closed her eyes as soon as the princess finished speaking. Contrary to her fears, however, he remained ominously silent. She tore at her skirt, her heart clenching.

"If you were a man," said Riftan, his forbidding voice ringing across the room, "I would have immediately challenged you to a duel."

"I should be grateful I was born a woman, then," the princess muttered bitterly. Sighing, she continued as though she were coaxing him. "Don't just lose your head. Take some time to think this over. If Maximilian does this, you'll be able to keep your knighthood and estate. And becoming a high mage will benefit her as well. With her skills, she will be able to leave Nornui within three years. You need only to endure until then, and everything will be solved."

Riftan looked as though he could murder the princess with just his eyes alone. After leveling his frighteningly dark gaze at her for a while, he slowly aimed it at Maxi.

"And you agreed to this?"

Maxi gulped and bobbed her head. She could not think of anything else but the burning lump lodged in her throat. Seeing her at a loss for words, Riftan let out a hollow laugh.

"I was the imbecile for keeping my mouth shut, thinking you had a proper plan."

"I-I'm sorry for not telling you of it sooner, but… I c-couldn't just let you lose everything…" Maxi trailed off at his sharp intake of breath.

Riftan clutched his forehead and asked through gritted teeth, "So… you decided to leave?"

"I-It would only be three years at most. I-I will… do my best! I won't sleep… or rest… and work h-hard every day… so I can return

as soon as—”

“Enough!”

Maxi recoiled. Riftan clenched his jaw, his shoulders trembling, as he attempted to rein in his rage. His face flushed before regaining its usual stone stillness. Maxi could tell that his resolve had solidified into something impenetrable, more solid than a brick wall.

Riftan turned to the princess and said evenly, “You can forget it. I will never allow it.”

The princess opened her mouth, an argument at the tip of her tongue, before she appeared to realize that words were futile. She stopped and took a silent step back.

“I will visit Anatol again soon,” she said finally. “You can think it over until then. You’ll see that this is the only option we have.”

“Don’t bother,” Riftan intoned as he pulled Maxi toward the door. “As long as I’m the lord of Anatol, you will never be welcome. I don’t want to see your face ever again.”

“R-Riftan… You mustn’t—”

Ignoring Maxi’s mortified protests, Riftan marched out of the room. Maxi looked over her shoulder as he dragged her along and saw Princess Agnes shaking her head. It was evident that the princess was just as taken aback by his reaction, which had been far angrier than expected.

Maxi was about to chide him for being too harsh when she noticed his grim expression.

“Make preparations to depart,” Riftan ordered the knights waiting outside. “We are leaving this castle.”

“Right now?” Elliot looked back and forth between Riftan and Maxi, then nodded without any objections. “Understood. I will prepare the carriage at once.”

Elliot raced down the corridor while Riftan continued walking with Maxi in tow. Ursuline, Ruth, and the other knights silently trailed them. They all seemed wary of Riftan’s menacing aura.

An hour later, their carriage was waiting for them in front of the castle gates. Maxi glanced at the knights in formation as she climbed in. They were leaving without paying their respects to the king. The

breach of etiquette briefly crossed Maxi's mind, but she dared not voice her concern. Riftan was too livid to care about such formalities.

Maxi sat down meekly and studied Riftan's face. He fixed his piercing gaze on her for a while before swinging the carriage door shut.

The moment he was out of sight, the cold tension drained from her lungs. Maxi rubbed her throbbing temples and let out a weary sigh. This was likely the beginning of their most exhausting argument yet, and the thought filled her with dread.

An air of uneasiness surrounded them as they set out. Everyone seemed to act as though they were traversing thin ice. The knights refrained from talking, and Riftan seemed to be dead set on ignoring Maxi.

After several failed attempts to speak to him, she gave up and idly watched the passing scenery. It occurred to her that it would be better to remain in this carriage forever.

If only the journey back to Anatol could last longer than a month; it would allow her the time she needed to think things through in a calm state of mind. More than anything, though, she wanted to delay the eventual confrontation.

Whenever they stopped to rest, Maxi would cautiously study Riftan's face. His fury was evident even from a distance. Though this was certainly not the first time she had witnessed his anger, she had never seen him so unstable.

Maxi felt miserable. It was not as if she wanted to leave his side either. Tears of anguish welled in her eyes, and she drew a blanket around herself as she huddled in the corner of the carriage.

"Are you all right, my lady?" Ursuline asked.

They had just arrived at Calypse Castle. The knight's voice was full of worry as he helped Maxi climb out.

She gave an automatic nod in response. After handing Talon's reins to a stable hand, Riftan strode over and snatched her arm from Ursuline.

"You and the others can rest after you've unpacked."

"Everyone in the castle will want to know what happened. What should we—"

"Tell them nothing has changed," said Riftan brusquely, heading toward the great hall.

Servants waited by the castle entrance to greet their lord, but Riftan did not even spare them a glance as he passed.

Maxi huffed as she tried to keep up with his quick steps. When they finally reached their bedchambers, cozy thanks to the warm fire, Riftan released his grip. He strode over to the armor stand where he began removing his robes and heavy armor.

For the first time, the palpable silence felt like torture. The only sounds were the crackling fireplace, rattling window, and clinking of armor. After a while, Maxi's anxiety got the better of her.

"I-I know that you're angry, but… there was no other way… t-to force my father to back down. I couldn't let you face a trial."

Riftan's hand froze as he was placing his sword belt on the stand. His fierce eyes flew to her.

"No other way?"

Maxi flinched back as he marched over. When she went to back away, he caught her and leaned threateningly close.

"Don't make me laugh. You could have just trusted me and let me handle it!"

"A-And your solution… was to leave Wedon?" Maxi bit her lip and glared back. "Do you really think… th-that abandoning everything — Anatol, the Remdragon Knights — is… a solution?"

Riftan's jaw tightened, and he swore under his breath. He grabbed her shoulders.

"It's decided, and I've already told the knights. I will have to give up the assets I've acquired as Anatol's liege so it can fund the running of the estate. I will still be able to take any personal assets from my mercenary days. You wouldn't have to worry about starving. Be it in Livadon, Osiriya, Balto, or Dristan… there are countless feudal lords who want me in their service. I can ask them for another piece of land and start over."

Maxi stared at him vacantly, unable to believe her ears.

"H-How can you… s-say something so irresponsible? Y-You are the lord of Anatol… and the commander of the Remdragon Knights. Th-The people in this castle… the residents of this land… all worship you. The knights would give up their lives for you! And yet… you're going to abandon them?"

Riftan's eyes wavered ever so slightly. He clenched his fists as if to double down on his resolve. "If I leave, Hebaron or Ursuline would rule over Anatol. And the order has many outstanding knights. They will be fine!"

"But they don't… w-want you to leave. And… I know you don't either. Don't even th-think about lying!"

Maxi jerked away from him and took a step back. The sight of him looking so helpless tore her heart to pieces.

"I have… w-witnessed firsthand how much you ch-cherish this land. Didn't you… work day and night so Anatol could flourish? Why would you abandon it now… when you're finally seeing the fruits of your labor? A-Are you going to… throw away everything you've built for the past decade… just for me?"

Maxi emphatically spread her arms. How could he decide to turn his back on the castle she had worked so hard to refurbish, the defenses he had built around it, and the city that had just begun to thrive?

"A-Are you in your right mind?" Maxi yelled. "O-Or have you gone completely insane?!"

"That's right!" He grabbed her as she went to move further away and forced her to look at him. "Nothing else matters more than having you by my side. I can build walls and amass riches as many times as necessary. Tell me to do it a thousand times, and I will!"

Maxi clenched her jaw to suppress the sobs that threatened to burst from her throat. His blind obsession with her was incomprehensible. What on earth was it that bound this man so steadfastly to her? Her eyes roamed over his desperate expression.

She did not want to leave his side either, not even for a moment. Nevertheless, a part of her was aware that this was not right. They could not turn their backs on the world and live only for themselves.

There were countless other things requiring his attention besides her.

"I-I…" Maxi croaked as though trying to dislodge a bone in her throat. "I want to go to Nornui."

Riftan stared back in disbelief. She desperately continued.

"B-Becoming a mage… would solve everything. Y-You won't have to lose your lands… or leave the Remdragon Knights. You… o-only have to wait three years. I promise I'll return without—"

"*Ha*…" His hollow laugh cut Maxi off. He dropped his gaze to the floor and mumbled dejectedly, "You want me to go through that hell again?"

He had his hands over his face, and Maxi could see his fingers trembling faintly. Her torn heart felt like it was bleeding.

When he raised his head once more, all signs of vulnerability were gone, replaced by a blank mask.

"That time might not mean anything to you, but I already endured three years to be with you. Only God knows how miserable and lonely they were."

His lips twisted into a wooden smile.

"You don't know what it's like for a day to feel like a year, and a year like an eternity. Nor what it's like to count the seconds, yearning for that person… Only someone who has no idea would ask that of me."

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"Th-That's not true. I-It was a difficult decision. It's going to be… hard for me too."

"Then…" Riftan paused as though stopping to quash some emotion. "Come with me."

Tears welled in Maxi's eyes. Unable to stop them falling, Maxi covered her face with her hands. Riftan hugged her waist and desperately tried to persuade her.

"If leaving me is not what you truly want, then come with me. Don't think about anything else! I'll make sure you have everything again — a castle, servants, all of it. We can finally be together. I refuse to be separated from you again. I can't endure another three years!"

Maxi thought that a dagger to the chest would not have been as painful. Anguish and desperation stirred in his black eyes.

The desire to give in felt as though it would split her in half. Her heart vehemently nodded in agreement, while her reason adamantly shook its head. It was clear to her which of the two she had to follow.

Maxi's face crumpled as tears streamed down her cheeks. She barely managed to get the words past her quivering lips.

"I-I can't do that."

Her throat burned as she tried to suppress the violent sobs that threatened to burst from her chest. She let out a ragged breath.

"How can you expect me to live with my head held high… a-after taking everything from you? Marrying me… h-has brought you… n-nothing good… You had to fight in a campaign you didn't want… and face harrowing ordeals… A-And now, you stand to lose everything… Y-Your knighthood, estate, fortune, your comrades… How can I turn a blind eye?!"

"I told you, it doesn't matter. Not to me! As long as I have you, nothing else matters!"

"I-It matters to me!"

Hot tears streamed down her cheeks. Maxi clutched her head and wailed, "All my life… I thought myself worthless. I c-couldn't bear the shame. That's why… I could never r-reveal my true self to anyone… That's why I couldn't be honest… And yet, I couldn't swallow my pride… so I lied… and pretended to be fine."

Maxi closed her eyes in an attempt to stem the endless flow of tears.

"I-I don't want to live like that anymore. I want… to stop hating myself."

She could just make out Riftan's face, contorted with misery, through her misty vision. She clutched his arm.

"I-I am not going… just for you. I want to change. I don't want to be… ashamed of myself anymore. So… let me go."

There was a pause.

"No," said Riftan. "I won't allow it."

He jerked his arm as though he had been branded and backed away.

"L-Let me go," Maxi cried. "You have to… let me go."

"I said, no!" Riftan shouted petulantly.

His broad shoulders, which had always seemed as immobile as a boulder, trembled violently. He looked at her with tormented eyes before fleeing the room.

Finding herself unable to go after him, Maxi sank to the floor. Her whole body shook as though she had just made it through a storm.

She hugged herself as she broke into sobs. Hot tears flowed down her cheeks, even soaking her neck. It felt like a part of her had been severed. Was all of this truly necessary? Must she leave him knowing it would hurt him and cause her nothing but misery?

Doubt and grief engulfed her. Squeezing her eyes shut, she covered her face with her hands and wailed. She resented everything that had led to this, including herself.

◆◆◆

When Maxi's tears finally dried up, the fatigue and tension that had been building over the last few days flooded in. She barely managed to wash with Ludis's help before getting changed. The dam of emotions that had collapsed inside her seemed to have sapped all the strength from her limbs. Maxi went straight to bed and lost consciousness.

Sunlight was streaming into the bedchamber when she came to. She sluggishly hauled herself up and squinted at the glowing windowpane, then at the empty space next to her.

After running her hand over the cold sheet, she climbed out of bed and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. She was about to head straight out to seek Riftan but thought better of it. He likely needed time to think, just as she had needed time to organize her thoughts.

Maxi tottered to the basin near the fireplace to wash her face. She began to get ready for the day, and Ludis entered the bedchamber just as she was combing her hair.

"Good morning, my lady."

The maidservant gave Maxi a genial smile and lowered an armful of wood next to the fireplace.

"Shall I bring your breakfast right away? You must be hungry after going to bed without a proper supper."

Maxi felt her heart soften at the maidservant's gentle expression. Her voice came out in a frog-like croak as she mumbled, "Yes, please."

"One moment, my lady. I will be back in a jiffy with a delicious meal."

After feeding the dying fire more kindling and stoking it with the bellows, Ludis went to leave the room.

Maxi asked hesitantly, "Do you… know where his lordship is?"

Ludis appeared unsure. "I believe he is in the council room. Would you like me to deliver a message, my lady?"

Maxi put on an awkward smile and shook her head. She was grateful for the maidservant feigning ignorance despite having heard

last night's argument. When Ludis left the room, Maxi sat in front of the fire and became lost in her thoughts.

The cats climbed onto her lap, purring and mewling. The sounds of servants chopping firewood on the grounds drifted in through the window. As Maxi sat listening, she felt the hollowness in her heart easing. It no longer felt so much like a wrecked boat lost at sea.

Blankly staring into the fire, Maxi thought back on the tumultuous events of the past. The day Riftan had whisked her away from her childhood home; her efforts to refurbish Calypse Castle as its new master; the countless trials; meeting Ruth, Ulyseon, and Garrow; her strengthened bond with the Remdragon Knights, and even her struggles learning magic. A small smile tugged at her lips.

A second later, her frustrating incompetence during the war and the loss of her child flashed through her mind. Her chest filled with sorrow and regret. Of the hundred or so things she regretted, shame hounded her when she thought of her decision to follow her father.

Nevertheless, it all amounted to the life she had built for herself.

Maxi closed her eyes. Now she would have to turn her back on everything she knew and enter the unknown. Despite the bone-deep fear, her resolve to leave somehow grew stronger.

A sudden realization struck her; the flood of words she had unleashed on Riftan last night had not solely been to persuade him. It was true that she wanted to be with him forever, but a part of her also yearned to step out from his shadow. Right now, she was slowly withering away in a world that only had room for the two of them.

Riftan had no qualms about destroying himself over anything concerning Maxi, while she was possessed by the perpetual temptation to cling to him and hide from the outside world. Left to continue, he would suffocate her, and she would drag his future through the mud. They would destroy each other in the name of love.

Maxi walked over to the window and looked up at the pale, late-winter sky. A flock of migrating birds passed overhead and into the distance. In the midst of the crushing sadness, something seemed to awaken inside her. It was too painful to be called hope and too fragile to be considered resolve.

She opened the window to let the cold wind cool her flushed face and fill her lungs. The pale gold sunlight seeping through the clouds seemed to signal the end of winter. The world seemed cruelly beautiful as it awakened from its slumber.

Riftan did not come back the next day, and Maxi deliberately avoided seeking him out. She wanted to give him time to marshall his thoughts. But, when there was still no sign of him on the fourth day of their return from Loverne, Maxi plucked up the courage to confront him in the council room.

When she reached the door, she could not bring herself to open it. How many more times must she rip his heart? It made no sense to her that she had to beg him to let her leave his side. She stood at the entrance fidgeting with her skirt before taking a step back. She stared down the slowly darkening corridor, lit by the remaining sun filtering through the windows.

Despite the temptation to return to her chambers, she managed to collect herself and stepped toward the door. She cautiously pushed it open.

Inside, Riftan was asleep on the couch. Maxi began creeping into the room but froze when she spotted an upturned goblet on the ground. He must have spilled wine, as there were deep red, blood-like stains soaking the carpet.

Maxi carefully picked up the goblet, wrinkling her nose as the pungent alcohol assaulted her senses. Next to the cup lay an empty wine bottle. It was clear that he would not be in any condition for a proper conversation.

With a sigh, Maxi shrugged off her cloak and draped it over Riftan's sleeping form sprawled across the velvet couch. She was about to leave when she heard his choked voice.

"She always stood on the hilltop, staring into the distance."

Maxi froze and turned to look at him. Riftan slowly opened his eyes and gazed back at her, his dark irises bleaker than she had ever seen before.

"The woman who gave birth to me. Whenever the sun rose, she would comb her hair and go up the hill. She was waiting for the man

who abandoned her."

Maxi tensed when she realized that he was referring to his secretive past. His flat voice, laced with derision, rumbled softly through the room.

"Can you believe it? She waited more than ten years for the man who used and cast her aside like an old shoe. A man that would've long forgotten about the peasant wench he once amused himself with."

Riftan's cynical laughter chilled the air. Maxi hunched her shoulders and slowly approached. He did not seem to care whether she was listening or not.

"My stepfather was a husk of a man. For twelve years, he lived with a wife who wouldn't even spare him a glance. And yet, that woman was obsessed with him. She kept waiting for the man she had spent no more than a few months with. She waited and waited… until she got word that he had died in battle, and hanged herself."

Maxi reached out to touch his hand but pulled back halfway. She felt a chill as though her lungs had filled with ice water.

Riftan scoffed coldly. "I found her dangling from the cottage ceiling. She was quite the beauty… but she met a gruesome end."

He sat up and swung his feet to the floor. Maxi's face was pale with shock.

Studying her reaction with unfeeling eyes, Riftan said, "You see, I swore that I would rather die than end up like her. That I would never allow myself to become so miserable…"

Maxi dropped to her knees and clasped his hand in hers. Then, the moment she cottoned on to the thought that had seized him, her heart shriveled with fear.

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Maxi desperately shook her head and stammered, "You are… n-nothing like her. You will… never be miserable. I will… I will be back before you know it. And then… I will never… leave again. Ever… I swear."

"I'm at my limit."

Maxi froze as she gazed at his stony face. Only his coal-black eyes showed pain.

"All this time I've wanted you… it felt like I was standing on burning coals. Do you have any idea what that means? I had to keep moving. Never sitting, never pausing. Always… always on the run, through a fire that might never end."

His raspy voice strained with exhaustion. Only then did Maxi realize just how gaunt his face had become over the last few days.

Riftan ran a hand over his haggard face. "I… want to be free of this pain now."

"Riftan… I…"

Maxi opened and closed her mouth, at a loss on how to respond. The reddish light filtering through the window cast his face in gloomy shadow.

"If you leave," said Riftan, "I'll no longer wait for you."

He continued when Maxi did not answer.

"I'll stop thinking about you. This time, I'll wipe you from my mind. I'll stop making myself miserable."

Maxi gaped at him, stunned.

He grabbed her forearm and, putting heavy emphasis on each word, said, "Will you still leave me then?"

All the air had been squeezed from her lungs. His black eyes held a warning — that this was the last time he would try to stop her. Maxi faltered and made to back away, but his grip remained vice-like on her arm.

Like a fish out of water, Maxi gaped noiselessly. Her heart pounded, and her throat stung as though she had swallowed glass. Her teeth chattered as she repeated her words over and over like a parrot.

"I-I'll come back. I'll come back to you… no matter what, s-so—"

The light in Riftan's eyes faded. Faced with the bleakness in them, Maxi found herself unable to continue.

Riftan slowly released her hand. "Fine."

Although she was the one who tried to break away first, seeing him withdraw his hand felt like she was being abandoned in the freezing snow.

His voice echoed hollowly around the room. "Then… go. To wherever it is you want…"

With that, he stood as if to indicate that there was nothing more to discuss. Maxi stood paralyzed, her face ashen, as Riftan walked over to the table. She leaped to her feet when he picked up a new goblet.

As she reached for him, he backed away and barked, "Don't touch me!"

Maxi flinched, the shock showing in her eyes.

Riftan glared as he snarled like a wounded beast, "If you touch me now, I'll never let you go. I'll keep you by my side by force if I have to. If that's not what you want…"

He took a step toward her, and Maxi instinctively retreated.

"…get the hell out of here right now."

Maxi did not answer.

"Don't think for a minute that you're leaving for my sake," Riftan continued. "I never wanted this. You're leaving… for you."

Maxi stood as immobile as a nail hammered into a door frame. Then, haltingly, she turned around on shaky legs. It felt like a knife was cutting into her flesh at every step.

She stared blankly at the long shadow extending from her feet. Though she wanted to look back, she was too afraid. She paused for a moment, as still as a statue, before stepping into the dark corridor.

When she had made it a short distance away from the council room, a crash sounded behind her. Maxi flinched at the deafening

racket. A chill prickled over her scalp, and she wondered what on earth she had done.

Had she gone insane? How could she consider leaving him? She could not bear to lose him, even if it meant losing the whole world.

Maxi whirled around, but her feet would not budge further as if they were glued to the floor. The urge to rush back and tell him that she would do as he wished tore at her insides. Even so, she could not take a step.

Tremors went through her as she stood in the corridor, unsure of what it was that held her there. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Did she really have to leave despite this pain? Why did she have to stand on her own two feet? She just wanted to surrender.

Fighting back her shaking sobs, she turned away once more. The invisible force around her began breaking down with each step. She felt like a chick emerging from an egg. Everything felt bleak, and Maxi bit her lip as her chest filled with grief and fear.

Light from the setting sun pierced her teary vision. She turned to gaze at the crimson light splintered and scattered by the windowpane. Then, she took a step.

She felt as though she would split in half from the pain.

Another step… Then another…

Epilogue

The weather grew warm in the span of a few weeks. Sitting by the window in the common room, Hebaron heaved a troubled sigh as he gazed over the training grounds bathed in dazzling sunlight. Though the wind was still chilly, the sunlight was noticeably warmer. Aquarias had come around once again.

As the number of visitors swelled, Anatol had become more vibrant than ever. Merchants from the Southern Continent brought all manner of rare goods, attracting traders from the West. Yet, this feverish spell of prosperity seemed to bypass Calypse Castle. For the past few weeks, the atmosphere within its stone walls had remained heavy.

"Why aren't you ready?"

Snapping out of his reverie, Hebaron looked up to see Ursuline Ricaydo descending the staircase in full armor. Hebaron surreptitiously swept his gaze over the knight's immaculate navy surcoat. The fabric seemed crisp and new. His armor was impeccably polished, reflecting its wearer's fastidious nature.

Hebaron narrowed his eyes. He had a suspicion that the maidservants played favorites thanks to the other knight's clean-cut image.

Ursuline frowned and stared at Hebaron. "Did you not hear me?" he barked irritably. "You need to get a move on."

Just as Hebaron rose languidly to his feet, Remus Baldo and Gabel Lachzion entered the common room.

"Sir Hebaron, we're told that her ladyship is ready to depart."

"Already?"

Frowning, Hebaron stuck his head out the window to get a better view of the castle gates. Two carriages laden with luggage stood waiting in the courtyard. It dawned on him that Lady Calypse was truly leaving.

Hebaron was blinking into the distance when Ursuline lost his temper.

"Do you intend to keep her ladyship waiting? Just stay behind if you don't feel like coming."

"Godammit, I'll be down in a minute."

Grumbling, Hebaron raced up the stairs with a lightness that seemed at odds with his huge physique. He snorted to himself at Ursuline's fussiness. Who would have guessed this change in attitude toward the lady of the castle? A bitter smile tugged at Hebaron's lips as he donned his armor.

The change in Ursuline's behavior was understandable. The knight had grown fond of the dainty noblewoman, as they all had. Not to mention, Ursuline had been part of the rescue mission at Croyso Castle. Having witnessed firsthand the horrible abuse she suffered there, his newfound compassion was unsurprising.

Sir Ursuline was not the only one. The incident must have affected Elliot as well, as he had been one of the most vehement about going to war with the duke. Though none of the knights disclosed the details of what had transpired, Hebaron was certain that Lady Calypse had suffered a great atrocity.

Suddenly overcome with rage, he threw the cloak in his hands onto the floor.

Croyso.

Thinking about how that dog had instigated their current predicament made his blood boil. He irritably ran a hand through his short hair. Imagining his commander's impassive face made him feel unbearably stifled.

Drawing out a sigh, he sank into a chair. When he had first heard that Lady Calypse intended to leave for the Mage Tower, his immediate thought had been that the commander would never allow it.

However, the commander had shattered everyone's expectations and relented. He had even picked up his long-neglected duties as liege of Anatol. By all appearances, everything seemed to have fallen into place.

Hebaron still felt uneasy at Riftan's unnatural calmness. The commander's reactions when it came to Maximilian Calypse were always unpredictable.

"Damn it. As if worrying about it now will change anything…"

He clicked his tongue and threw on his navy surcoat emblazoned with the white dragon of their order. Now in full armor, he stepped out of the room and came face-to-face with Ursuline's disapproving glare.

"Why are you dawdling?! Are you waiting for the sun to set?"

"Cease your nagging. What are you, my wife?"

Ursuline scowled in response. He looked as if he were about to unleash a barrage of further grumbling. Instead, he spun around as if he could not be bothered dealing with the other knight any longer.

Hebaron followed Ursuline as he set off. "More importantly… have you formally apologized to her ladyship?"

Ursuline stopped in his tracks. "No. I missed the right moment."

With that, he resumed his quick strides.

Hebaron clasped his hands behind his head and taunted, "What a load of drivel. I had no idea you were so timid."

It was unusual for Ursuline to not have a cutting retort ready, and this seemed to be one of those rare moments. He pursed his lips together.

Hebaron chuckled at Ursuline marching ahead with an indignant look on his face. It was amusing to see him acting so out of character, walking on eggshells around a woman as petite as her ladyship.

"Stop dithering and do it today, before she leaves. It's going to haunt you if you keep putting it off."

In a silent warning to stay out of his business, Ursuline shot daggers at Hebaron before swiveling his head away. They passed through the training grounds, Ursuline's strides precise and controlled, while Hebaron trailed behind at his own languid pace. When they reached the castle entrance, they saw a throng of servants gathered in the great hall.

Hebaron easily picked out the woman with dark auburn hair. Maximilian Calypse was accepting something from the old mage who

had joined their ranks last year. Hebaron assumed that it must be an herb pouch.

"This is a good remedy for the chill, and this aids mana restoration. The decoction in this vial helps ease seasickness. And this…"

Although it appeared that Maximilian was attentively listening to the old mage's expounding without a hint of annoyance, Hebaron noticed her eyes occasionally flitting over the crowd. A heavy sigh escaped his lips.

"Our apologies for keeping you waiting, my lady."

Ursuline walked over to her and respectfully bowed his head. Maximilian Calypse turned to look at him with a brilliant smile.

"I-It's all right. I was… saying my farewells."

Hebaron's face betrayed his complicated emotions. Seeing her efforts to conceal her sadness made him feel as though he was doing something terrible.

She flicked a glance behind them and tentatively asked, "W-What about… Riftan?"

"The commander… is attending to urgent matters on the ramparts. He gave us strict instructions to safely escort you to the port."

Her smile dissolved. Hebaron inwardly cursed the commander as a dark shadow passed over her ladyship's round gray eyes.

"W-We should… get going," she said, her voice unnaturally bright as if to disguise her disappointment. "The princess… is waiting for us at the port."

She was about to climb into the carriage when a loud cry sounded in the distance.

"P-Please wait!"

Hebaron jerked his head up. Ulyseon and Garrow raced through the grounds in their training uniforms. The servants hurriedly parted to make way for them.

"W-We wanted to say goodbye…" Ulyseon said, panting. He handed Maxi a fistful of wildflowers. "We searched the whole mountain… but there were only small bulbs like these due to the cold. I know it's not much, but would you accept them, my lady?"

Maximilian had been blinking at the squire's offering. As she carefully took the flowers from him, a smile lit Ulyseon's face.

The lad had grown noticeably taller in the last few months. He now arranged his features into a mature expression befitting of a knight and said, "You must return in good health, my lady."

"Th-Thank you. The same to you… Ulyseon."

"Please be well, my lady," said Garrow.

Maximilian smiled at the squire and climbed into the carriage. The twenty knights in the escort party, including Hebaron and Ursuline who were assigned as her personal guards, mounted their horses in unison.

Hebaron stationed himself next to the carriage while Ursuline took the lead. After passing a sharp eye over the knights' formation, Ursuline signaled their departure. The castle gates opened wide, and the drawbridge began to lower.

Surrounding the carriage on all sides, the knights slowly crossed the bridge and descended the hill. Down in the village, people flocked to the main road to catch a glimpse of the Remdragon Knights.

As they silently rode through the crowd, Hebaron peeked into the carriage window. He could see Maximilian's slender shoulder slumped over through the half-open curtain. Her long hair, tied in a single braid, seemed too heavy for her delicate neck. A feeling close to guilt grated at him. He had been the one to ask her to testify after revealing the commander's plight.

Hebaron rubbed his throbbing temples as he recalled Riftan's rage. He wished that the commander would just express his anger as he had back then. Now, Riftan seemed to be trying to repress all of his emotions. Hebaron had never seen him look so vulnerable.

Maximilian had somehow managed to convince Riftan, but it was clear that it had not been an amicable agreement. It was not unusual to overhear the servants in the great hall expressing their concerns for the lord and lady.

Still, I didn't think he would refuse to see her off…

Hebaron felt regretful. Perhaps he should have dragged the commander with them. Then again, who in their right mind would

dare to mention her name with the way he was now? He was nothing but a stone statue devoid of all emotions.

Ever since they had found out Maximilian was leaving for the Mage Tower, the knights had spoken as little as possible whenever they were in Riftan's presence. Everyone knew what she meant to him.

"I hear singing…"

Hebaron turned his head toward the unexpected voice. Maximilian was staring out the window, into the distance.

They had passed the square and were now on the outskirts of the city. To the right of the wide road was a gentle hill. Sheep dotted the wide, grassy expanse that seemed to stretch on and on. A faint tune of a vielle carried over to them.

"They must be practicing for the Spring Festival," Ruth chimed in. The sorcerer had ridden up to the carriage without Hebaron noticing. "They're putting in significant effort now that there are more visitors than ever. There's singing all over the village these days."

"I see," Maximilian replied after a pause.

Her smile looked bitter, and her eyes seemed to cloud over. After gazing at the hill, tinged green with new life, she looked down once more. They rode past the ramparts in heavy silence. Soon, the vast road that had caused them so much trouble throughout last year stretched before them.

They sped down for about an hour and a half before the sea appeared on the horizon, beyond a gentle slope. Massive ships lined the extensive pier, and several sizable merchant buildings stood tall along the dock.

Princess Agnes was on the pier. As soon as she spotted the Anatolian party, she cut through the bustling group of workers transporting cargo.

"You're finally here! I was worried that you'd changed your mind."

Ursuline jumped off his horse and bowed to the princess. "Apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Highness. The preparations took longer than we expected."

"It's fine. We were busy loading the cargo," the princess said, pointing to one of the ships lining the pier.

The massive vessel bore the royal crest of Wedon. The royal knights and mages who had come as the princess's escort were gathered on the boardwalk in front.

"We've just finished all the preparations. You can go ahead and board now."

Hebaron dismounted and helped Maximilian out of the carriage. Her lucid gray eyes seemed to take in the ship's huge hull.

Standing next to Maximilian, Princess Agnes said gently, "Only those with permission from Nornui may enter. Hence, the royal knights will escort you from here on. I will accompany you as well, of course. I've decided to stay on the island for about a month to help you settle in."

A look of relief flashed across Maximilian's face. Only then did Hebaron realize just how distressing it must be for her to be headed into the unknown.

"I-I would… appreciate that very much."

"There's no need to worry. The Mage Tower is the safest, most exciting place for a mage to be. You'll fit right in," the princess said cheerfully, then motioned to the crew.

While the deckhands loaded all the luggage in the carriage onto the ship, Maximilian said her farewells to the knights.

"I-I want to thank you… for everything. You must all look after yourselves."

"You must take care too, my lady," Hebaron replied awkwardly, scratching his cheek. "We wish you a safe journey."

The other knights followed suit and offered their parting words. After watching these proceedings in silence, Ursuline finally spoke.

"My lady, I wish to say that I am sorry… for my past actions."

Maximilian looked flustered by the sudden apology, to which Ursuline bowed his head.

"I've been meaning to apologize to you for my discourteous behavior."

She waved her hands, clearly taken aback. "Y-You don't have to apologize. I… did not take it to heart."

Ursuline gave her a rueful smile and said, "Please return to us as soon as possible. The commander needs you."

The smile vanished from her face. Hebaron thought that she might burst into tears. However, her voice was surprisingly calm when she spoke.

"Please… look after him. You must keep him… from doing anything too reckless."

Ruth had his hood pulled down to his nose, clearly uncomfortable being among the royal mages.

"Please don't worry about Sir Riftan," he cut in. "I will make sure to be in his ear constantly."

He stepped closer and practically tossed something at her.

"This is the most expensive magic stone in my possession. Please take good care of it. It will likely come in handy."

"Th-Thank you. You've done… so much for me."

"I'm grateful for the recognition," Ruth quipped, then appeared hesitant as he awkwardly scratched the back of his head. He let out a deep sigh and blurted, "Please, come back in one piece."

"Don't worry. I will return… safely," Maximilian replied, setting her shoulders straight.

Quite suddenly, Hebaron recalled the first time he had seen her.

The hunched shoulders, folded over in apprehension; the fearful, pale face; the vulnerable look in her eyes. It was all so clear. Was that fragile being really the same person as the woman standing before him?

Maximilian put on a brave smile and turned to board the ship. Her red hair glistened in the blazing sun. The thought that he would not be seeing this petite woman hovering around, healing people with magic, made a part of him feel empty.

He waved back at Maximilian, who now stood leaning over the railing. Soon, the ship slowly began to sail away from the dock. They remained rooted to the spot until the ship grew smaller and she was but a speck.

Thundering hooves sounded behind them. The knights all turned in unison, hands at the hilts of their swords. A cloaked figure jumped onto the pier and came rushing toward them at a frightening speed.

Realizing that it was Riftan, Hebaron instinctively flung himself in his path. Riftan shoved him away and tried to leap into the sea, as

frantic as a madman. The rest of the knights snapped out of their stunned stillness and cried out in alarm. They rushed to restrain him.

Riftan howled like a chained beast. “Let go!”

“Goddammit, are you mad?!”

“I said, get your cursed hands off me!” Riftan bellowed, thrashing his limbs.

He was so strong that even four men could not restrain him. Hebaron swore and forcibly pushed him to the ground.

“Stop it! It’s done. Even you can’t go after her now!”

Riftan’s chest heaved as he exhaled a ragged breath. He was completely disheveled, and his eyes quivered wildly as he gazed after the ship that was growing more and more distant by the second.

Hebaron held his breath. Like a crumbling dam, Riftan’s body tipped forward. His voice was barely audible.

“I lied.”

Droplets spattered the wooden planks. With his arms restraining Riftan, Hebaron blinked dazedly. He did not think the commander was even aware that he was crying.

Riftan appeared to be in a trance as he mumbled, “I lied… when I said I wouldn’t wait for you.”

No one dared to speak as they watched the commander’s shoulders give a violent shake. The tranquil swishing of the waves filled the air. Riftan gazed over the shifting sea, his face scrunching as if it blinded him. The ship faded as it sailed into the hazy horizon.

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[1] Approximately 3 meters.

[2] Approximately 4.5 meters.

Also by Suji Kim

There is a mouse in my house (in Korean)

Crime of Crime (in Korean)

Twilight Poem (in Korean)

A Lukewarm Couple (in Korean)

Bongru (in Korean)